

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1996

Hot seat| A selection of essays and short fiction

Steve Kalling

The University of Montana

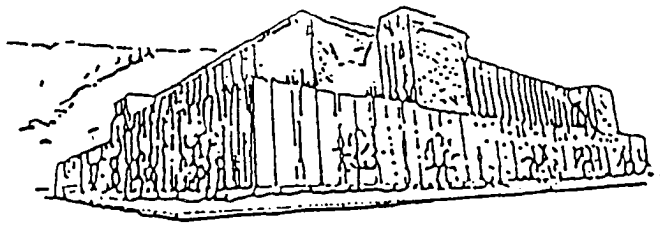
Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Kalling, Steve, "Hot seat| A selection of essays and short fiction" (1996). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2590.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2590>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



Maureen and Mike
MANSFIELD LIBRARY

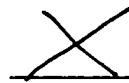
The University of **MONTANA**

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety,
provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in
published works and reports.

*** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature ***

Yes, I grant permission

No, I do not grant permission



Author's Signature

Date

26 July, 1996

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with
the author's explicit consent.

THE HOT SEAT
A Selection of Essays and Short Fiction

by

Steve Kalling

B.G.S. The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1989

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

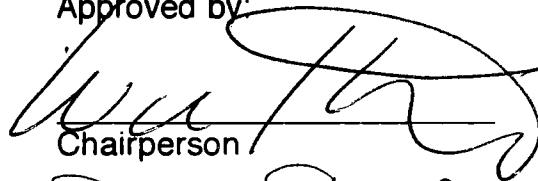
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1996

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

7-30-96

Date

UMI Number: EP34923

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP34923

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

CONTENTS

The Hot Seat	1
Siddhartha, Sasquatch, and Science Fiction	28
I Better Stop Now	49
Collusion	50
Rollercoasters	65
Touchtone Paradise Blues	66

For my family, always.

THE HOTSEAT

There is so much I want to tell about being on lookout. Maybe something about the sudden violence of storms, the heavy rain spilling from black clouds and sucking all the heat from the tiny fire gnashing in a rusted cast-iron stove. I want to tell about the sudden flashbulb bursts of bluewhite arc light when the lightning strikes. The hollow aftermath of trembling red-rimmed afterimages skittering around my vision and gathering the fragments of seconds, strange and plastic, before the sharp hammer crack of close thunder jarring and abrupt. Farther away thunder comes on in waves the deep rolling kettle drums echoing off the rock basins; the soundtrack to the startling roughhouse play of ancient gods. In lightning storms, the whole tower hums with anticipation, crackling with static, waves of it pulsing my hair up off my head and like a windless breeze. The thumbthick bolts on the shutters and the iron nailheads glow like electric blue icicles and stars in the mists. The stove and firefinder pop and send thin sparks back and forth when lightning explodes against the tower. Treetops turn magnificently into sparks and flinders while the air fills with the curiously sweet, dizzying afterplay of ozone and sulphur. The whole tower rocks and sways in the surges of wind, tethered by four braided steel cables. The heavy wooden shutters flap like stiff albatross wings bucking gravity. Everything shakes and twists, the floor pitching like a small boat's deck in a heavy sea, but stands firm before the prows of thunderhead ships.

And always in the back of my mind the voice of premonition, even when I am elated and manic in the swirling winds of thunderstorm afterglow, a voice

calm and reasonable and decidedly not my own whispers steadily: one day the weather will win, gravity will at last prevail, here for me as it does for us all eventually. And my tower will fall and my time on top of the world will end.

But that would be starting in the middle. If I start at the beginning it might go something like this:

Once upon a time in Idaho there were 966 lookouts scattered over peaks and ridge tops the whole state wide. Some of the mountaintops had log cabins with cupola rooms on top, others were merely one tall tree with a platform nailed part way up. Some were tall timber towers built like railroad bridges from thick creosote soaked timbers, others were stone cabins lashed to the tops of craggy mountains to face the wrath of wind and weather. Today, fewer than a hundred still stand, and of those only a few dozen are active fire detection points. Some have fallen to time and weather, others to vandalism and the violence of fires which surged around and over them.

More, however, have fallen to budgetary concerns and governmental policy. "Burn them down if they are a hazard or eyesore" was the standing order for a long while through the seventies and early eighties. Maintenance costs and potential liability loom large on the horizon of the future of lookout towers. Satellites, airplanes and a shrinking national forest all contribute to onrushing obsolescence. I can make no argument for their necessity to the world; I only know that mine is essential to me and the person I am ever in the process of believing myself to be. I reckon this is as good a place as any to begin my tall tower tales.

Six summers ago, on my way from Maine to somewhere else I wasn't ever really sure of, I stumbled across a job as a fire lookout in north central

Idaho. One month out of work with three hundred dollars in my pocket and three quarters of a tank of gas in my van, I stopped to hike and climb and think in the Lochsa River country of Idaho. I'd been out of college for a little over a year and I was trying to get a handle on what I should do next. I'd started out the fall before working in Maine, teaching at an environmental school. It was a pretty good job for lousy pay and I managed to lose that job right after Christmas, most likely because I have a big mouth, no sense as to when to hold it shut and a bad attitude toward people who seem entirely too full of their own self-importance. People for whom I happen to work.

Suffice it to say that afterwards I was at large on the east coast with no restraints upon my time. I managed to do a fair bit of piecemeal odd job kinds of work through the spring. All the while I knew I was missing something. I didn't know what it was, or in which facet of my existence the absence was rooted. I only knew a growing sense of dissatisfaction. Part of it may have had something to do with needing to feel of use. I needed to matter somehow in the grand scheme of things, to feel I was carrying my own water on this nomadic migration through the sanddrifts of days. I needed something. At one point I figured the something was a someone, but it wasn't. Nor has it been any of the other times i tried to figure it the same way. So, as the spring opened up all around me in New England, I felt an urgency to move on and know something else.

My father had some severe health problems. A heart attack had knocked his feet out from under him and shook me up pretty good too. All this was rambling around in my mind as I pulled off the highway In Idaho and decided to walk back a ways up the trail and spend a few days trying to sort things out. Like where was I going? What was I planning or even hoping to do when I got

there? Why was I doing this in the first place? Little questions like that followed me into the woods.

I'm not sure what I'd thought Idaho would be like before I got there. Maybe a big place where potatoes grew and extremely white rednecks ran rampant with automatic weapons. I figured there'd be lots of trucks and men with hats. I was unprepared for the lush steep country, the wild rivers and streams, whitewater and clear cold water lined with staggering thick cedars and huge ponderosa pines. On my way into the woods, I hiked past some hotspots. There were three or four people there, and after that I didn't see another person the whole four days I spent back in the woods. I felt I was someplace I needed to be. I have never paid much attention to the callings of the land and the notions of belonging and place which seem to besiege some folks. But this time, I really felt something pulling me, changing my gravity in a subtle manner. I'd only intended to spend a night out and then get on the road again, but somehow I ended up three nights out and walking out on the fourth morning only because I'd been without much food for two days. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I really wished I could stay in the Lochsa country a while longer.

On my way out of the woods, I met a wilderness ranger. We walked the last few miles together and she explained her job to me: She hikes trails for ten days at a time, all through the Lochsa backcountry, over ridges and up onto peaks. The forest service buys her food and writes a check every two weeks. All that seemed to me a lot better possibility than what I had going: maybe packing fish in maybe Alaska with a maybe friend who might maybe already have gone, maybe to Japan to maybe teach English, and a few other handfulls of maybe. What the hell? One maybe was as good as the rest, so I asked.

"No luck," she says. "No openings for wilderness rangers." We walk along a trail knotted with roots and heavy with the sweet of old cedars and running water and after a few minutes she stops and I nearly run into her because I am thinking about something else. "You know, " she says and points at the long antenna arcing from her heavy pack "I heard on the radio this morning that we just had a lookout quit, if you're interested..." She trails off and wipes at a smear of pinesap and dirt on her cheek. Instantly I see myself as Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Ed Abbey all rolled into one and walking ahead of mule train up a foggy winding trail. I could see some gray bearded packer cracking jokes at me and planning to get into my coffee and whiskey as soon as we crest the ridge and get a fire going in the cast-iron stove. I have a remarkable ability to project my own life into fiction

"That'd be great," I say, and I'm off to the ranger station.

It's all a big blur. I meet people, fill out forms, meet more people and get told to come back in three days. I leave and come back one sunny morning. I get my hand shaken by four or five people in the fire office and they send me up to Rocky Point Road with another lookout to show me the ropes.

Rocky Point is a tower you can drive to. It's not a very good road, particularly as seen from behind the wheel of my VW van all loaded up with stuff. The guy, Matt, I'm following up is pushing his 4x4 pretty hard. He'd seemed in a hurry at the station when we met, and he hurries all the way up. Some of the corners slope out to drop-offs through clearcuts, and I'd get nervous over some of the washboard, and very nervous over the parts of the road where there was nothing but blasted apart edges of solid rock.

Eventually I found my way through the dust and ruts and pine and fir stands to a teardrop turnaround. Matt was out of his truck and halfway up a steep little trail when I got there. I parked next to his truck and put some pieces

of rock under the tires. I hurried to follow him. The trail was steep and very dusty dry and when I made the hundred yards or so up to the top I was greeted by a flat topped red and white building. There was a stairway up one flight to the level that had windows and all around us was a view far and wide, mountains and drainages, trees and more trees, and strange square patches all over everywhere. I was really breathing hard when we got up. He'd already opened up the door and gone in. I stood outside leaning on the railing and unable to believe where I was standing and what I was seeing. The sky was like a big half bubble of blue with a little fringe of dark clouds way off to the west. A light wind dried the sweat on my face and on my back and hushed through the tree tops just below the tower.

The bottom of the tower was cement block, a tall one story foundation with a flat roofed cabin on top of it. All around the cabin was a dark red catwalk with a railing. The place looked like it could use a coat of paint. Matt was inside the cab, standing by the cot and stuffing some clothes into a duffel bag. He'd been on the lookout filling in while they hired another one.

"There's your stove and oven. Only the front burners have pilots that work, so use matches to light the back two. This is the woodstove and your wood is downstairs. There is another load by helipad over there," He points somewhere off past where the rigs were parked, but I had no idea what he was talking about. "The outhouse is down there. I put a fresh roll in yesterday, if the squirrels haven't got it. And this is the fire finder." He points to a tall wooden cabinet in the center of the tower. It has a round map on top of it, which slid on metal rods. There was a crosshair sight over a thin metal ribbon which bisected the circular map. In the very center of the map was a metal spike about a quarter of an inch long stuck right through a red hexagon on the map. I look close and read the words 'Rocky Point LO' right by the red hexagon. I noticed a

sketchy line around the red mark and figured it was the road we drove on. I figure we're sitting on the red mark and all the country around us is what's on the map. I touch the spike and say "This us?"

"Right," Matt said. "And what you do is you look through here." He swings the crosshair sights around the map. Somehow they pivot in a circle with the metal band always turning and keeping the map in two halves. The map doesn't turn. "You look through here and put the cross hairs on the base of the fire if you can see it or on the center of the smoke closest to where it comes over the ridge, right?" He was squinting through the sight dealie and then looking at me.

"Right," I said.

"You read your azimuth here," He points to some numbers etched along the outside of the map. "Your azimuth is the bearing from you to the fire."

He showed me how to use the radio to call in fires and also to check in twice a day.

"Any questions?" he says grabbing his duffel bag and looking out the windows to the west. Blue sky, except for the little fringe of dark clouds which seemed a little bigger way down the river.

"Nope," I say, not knowing where to even begin.

"You'll figure it out ok. I'll be up Bear Mountain later." He points down river somewhere and nods. I look, but have no idea what he means.

"Right," I say and nod too. He shakes my hand and hurries down the steps and down the trail. I stand out by the railing and watch him go, feeling the wind and realizing I am going to be really alone in a minute.

"Hey," he yells out from by his truck.

"Yeah?" I called back.

“When the lightning comes, don’t touch the radio, the stove or the alidade. Stay on the little stool or the bed. It’s grounded.” He pulls open the door to his truck and is inside before I can say anything.

“What lightning? What stool? What do you mean?” I’m yelling all this but he’s starting his truck and clattering down the steep rocky road back to the ranger station.

As the dust from his truck settled and the far away rattle of his rig on the rocks faded into the wind I got the feeling that I was missing something else, but I didn’t know what it was. I stood in the sun a while, listening to the wind and watching the trees sway in the surges of air which rose and fell like slow breathing. I saw a red tailed hawk riding thermals drift by right about eye level and not more than thirty feet away from me. It tipped sideways in the wind and was gone into the trees in an eye blink. I smiled the whole while I unloaded my van, making eight or ten trips up the dusty trail. It was late in the afternoon by the time I finally got all my gear squared away. I was tired from carrying stuff, and tired from being excited. I cooked myself a big dinner and had just finished washing all the dishes when I realized it was almost sunset time. I looked around at the far away horizon, saw the near ridge the sun was going to touch first and then all the dark clouds which were going to catch the edges of the light and tip it deep into fantasy colors.

Right near the tower was the true top of the mountain, a big square hunk of rock which jutted out almost as high as the catwalk. I climbed up it and settled into a niche and decided that this was the new official sunset watching place. The dark jagged high wall of clouds filling the south part of the sky along the river and beyond was already starting to fill with colors. The shadows grew long and golden and when the wind ebbed I thought I caught the faintest distant rumble of far away thunder. A storm was brewing up. Of course, that’s what the

clouds were about. I felt foolish for not having thought of it before then, but I was going to get to watch a lightning storm from one cool spot. I was the highest point for thirty miles in any direction, I wouldn't miss a thing.

Right about then it dawned on me that nothing was going to miss me either. I was about the tallest thing around and had a big metal antennae attached to the roof to boot. I understood now why Matt was in such a hurry. He wanted to be up in his own tower before the weather hit. I heard another rumble and saw some flickerings in the clouds. A little while later more rumbles, louder this time and tried to remember what you had to count between the flash and the boom to figure out how far away it was. I did some quick math and came up with every second would be pretty close to $\frac{2}{10}$ th of a mile or one mile every five seconds (or three every seventeen to be closer to precise). While I was working all this out I saw a thin finger of light connect the clouds to a ridge top a ways down river. I started counting and thirty-three counts later I heard the rumble and boom. About six miles away and coming on. I went back into the tower.

I could see a little thread of smoke above the ridge where the lightning hit. I took the binoculars and could see a tiny red glow just over the top of the ridge. I cranked the fire finder around and tried to line up the smoke in the crosshairs but part of the window frame blocked me from getting a bead right on it. I tried sliding the alidade back and forth on its track but always the window frame was in the way. I got frustrated. This is almost always how it happens. I watched the fire grow and finally just guessed. I got the topographical maps out and started trying to figure out which section the fire was in, only I couldn't tell which of the tiny ridges far away it was burning behind.

The wind picked right then to surge up and blow the door open. All all my maps swirl into a big pile. A bright flash of lightning and loud crackboom come all at once. I catch the afterimage of the strike just below the tower. A

tree top bursts into flames and sparks fly around everywhere. Through the static on the radio I hear a lookout say "out of service for lightning" and then the strikes fall everywhere. I try to slam the door, but the wind won't let me. I am getting excited, or maybe scared. I push it shut once and then hop up on the bed and try to watch everywhere all at once. The door flies open and sheets of rain hammer against the tower. The wind really picks up, rattling the windows and blowing everything all around. It's suddenly almost totally dark. My flashlight is still down in the van.

There is always some work to do on lookouts. Most lookouts are wooden and several decades old. The extremes of weather on mountain tops takes it's toll; hard angry winds up to a hundred miles, bitter cold winters and dry hot summer all leave their mark. So do vandals, humans and other animals. On Diablo Lookout there is a destructive Marmot. He gets hungry for salt and chews at the sides of the Lookout cab for the plywood glue. Every few seasons someone gets sent out there to do the maintenance. The last few years that someone has been me.

Diablo is a relatively new tower, built in 1965 to replace the original cabin built in 1922. Diablo sits midway along a high east-west ridge, 7,500 feet above sea level. It's just over eight miles west of Blodgett Peak and the rest of the Bitterroot crest. To the south the ridge slopes steeply and thickly wooded down into Moose Creek, then back up the fire scarred Goat Heaven Peaks.

There are three lakes almost eye level with the view from Diablo's outhouse. The sign on the door reads "Goat Lakes Viewpoint."

Not six big steps north from the tower's base a sheer granite cliff falls about a thousand feet down into a basin. It's usually green down there and sometimes I'll see elk herds, wandering bears and moose, and now and again lost hikers. I lose my breath standing on the rock outcropping that lips over the drop. I crawl out and hang my head over, letting the vertigo overwhelm me and then subside until a huge calm pours into me like the deep breath I seem to never be able to quite catch back in the world of traffic lights and busy city dreams.

Nearby, just off to the right from the granite shelf is Duck Lake. Mud bottomed and deeper than I am tall in at least one place, it's mystery lures fishermen up from Elk Summit and out along the trail-less ridge and back down the steep other end near the lake. On their way past, fishermen promise to bring up a few on their way back, but it's never happened.

On the map, the little lake looks like it's just down from the lookout, less than half a mile away. Indeed, it is less than half a mile, if you can fly. It takes me closer to an hour and a half to pick my way around and down to it, and usually something like that to scramble back up. Just past the tower, the trail ends and the way turns steep and is unmarked. It's different every time for me. I learned my lesson about shortcuts the hard way one summer evening.

Trying to save time after an ill-considered late afternoon swim in the icy water, I decided to scramble up one of the boulder strewn avalanche chutes. Steep and treacherous the chute was alluring in its seeming directness as a way back up. The lookout was just up over there. I could see it. The whole basin was well into twilight shadow, the only sun left lay low and soft on the tops of the Bitterroot peaks behind me.

On my way up, working back and forth across rock shelves and the tops of old rock slides, I wondered about my judgment. I should back down and go the long way around. Just about then, from across the lake I heard three or four coyotes yippering and whining. Usually at dusk I'd howl back at them from my tower and play echo games until one of us got bored and quit. This time it spooked me a bit. I kept quiet and stepped back onto the top of an old slide I'd just crossed. The rocks shifted. I lunged back to the little ledge I and watched the slide fall away below me. I couldn't go back or move sideways anywhere. I had to climb up the cold steep rock. My legs were shaking.

I worked up and across near vertical rock faces, trying to find hand holds and places for my toes. Most of the time I was just talking myself into trusting the rock and my skin for enough friction to hold off gravity a while longer. This would have been great fun on belay with ropes and harnesses, fun with a friend in bright hot daylight; but I was all by my self in the gathering dark.

When I finally pulled up on top of the ridge it was completely night. The last fifty feet or so I had been spread eagle, working up a narrowing chimney of rock, feeling my way in starlight and shadows. I sat with my feet dangling, my chest heaving and fingers bleeding. All my muscles burned and twitched with lives of their own. I lay back and rolled my head on the top of the rock, slowly back and forth. The stars were clear and closer to me than I have ever seen them. The sky bulged down to embrace me. I was immersed, part of everything I could see. Three shooting stars streaked over in slow motion. The coyotes began their yippering down on the lake shore. This time I howled back, my place in the world coming clear.

Two summers ago I went for a month on Diablo. The Marmot had been busy. On one of my first mornings there he went after my splitting axe handle. I'd carelessly left my work and tools lying about while I took a walk and ended up at the outhouse. On the way back up, I glimpsed the tan oblong shape of the marmot moving over the larch rounds I had out in the sun. I also noticed the axe was laying in the dirt, not stuck blade down in the block like I'd left it. I didn't pay too much attention, looking around at the faraway horizon, soft with the morning dew haze rising off all the forest all around. It was windless and almost hot in the sun, the air sweet with hearts of the cured larch I was knocking into small pieces to feed the stove at night. I was also trying to watch the marmot, who was busy watching me from behind some rocks beside the tower. I should have been paying more attention, but when I centered another round on the block and picked up the axe, I was only thinking of how warm the sun was on my back, and how lucky I was just to be on the mountain with work ahead of me I liked to do.

I like to lose myself in the rhythm of splitting wood, seeing only the machine-like precision of placing the round and swing the axe right to the place I aim, time after time. I love the explosion of wood around the steel of axe head, the satisfaction as the blade bites deep into the chopping block and the halves fall in sheer planes of fragrant wood. When I reared back and swung this time however a jagged tooth notched gash in the handle peeled a strip of rough skin from around the knuckle of my right thumb. I stared at it incredulous, watching the white jagged flesh fill to pink and then spill astonishingly dark blood out and over my palms. I noticed the teethmarks, and saw the old marmot who was now sitting up on his back legs ontop of the boulder field, watching me. I was pretty sure he was laughing at me.

I am sometimes better at paying attention than at other time. What it was I neglected to pay attention to in this instance was nothing particularly profound, seen from the outside. All I did was not turn the axe over and look at the other side of the handle. I grew tired of staring at the fat marmot, and picked up my axe to continue my chores. I sucked some blood from my thumb and spat on the chopping block. I could see where he'd chewed and took a grip just below the fresh teeth marks. Inhaling and slinging the whole deal over my right shoulder I stared at the place I wanted the axe to hit. I tried to focus every thing I had and was on that one spot and then, exhaling sharp I let fly, arcing my arms and shoulders, springing with my legs and driving, not the blade of the axe into the wood as I intended, but the huge splinter torn loose by the bastard marmot's buck teeth into the meat of my hand. Further, the shock so unnerved me that I allowed the axe to twist in my hands, the flat of the blade striking the edge of the block and snapping the head clean off. Even this was not enough, for once in motion, events will spiral and collide until they come to rest. The head of the axe bounced off the chopping block and struck sparks on a hunk of granite before ricocheting at my left foot and splitting the leather toe of my boot and the real toe of my foot. All this was rather sudden and I stood stunned, a broken axe handle sticking out of my hand, and a broken axe head sticking out of my foot. Well, my boot, but from where I stood it sure looked a hell of a lot like my foot at the time.

In 1994, before all the big fires started to roll, one of the other lookouts was out here, putting a new roof on the tower. His proclivity towards firearms and violence were well known and I was unsurprised when he called me on the radio one night to tell me he had shot the marmot and booted the carcass over the edge. He seemed to expect that I would be somehow glad of this information, but I remember thinking it was an unnecessary disturbance of the

waters. I am all for disturbing the universe on occasion, but toward some end, some ultimate transcendence, not just killing a small rodent for entertainment and rationalizing it as some sort of protection of the perimeter.

Over the years I have found myself with considerable time on my hands to consider the basis for my interactions with the wilderness. There as an employee of the Federal agency in charge of managing the nations forests, I see myself on occasion as one who keeps the fire from the crops until they may be pulled down. I recognize my role in the gradual erosion of resources, I admit that I participate in the skewing of the natural rhythms as humankind strives for a balance between symbiosis and parasitism. Too often I believe we end up as parasites on the host planet, rather than contributing symbiotes. The way the other lookout shot the marmot because it was gnawing at a little plywood each year seems to me to be the parasite mentality at the helm.

A few mornings after my axe and foot incident I heard something gnawing on the edge of the tower and peeked around the corner to stare at the fearless eyes of a huge marmot with a black round scar just behind his right foreleg. He watched me for a few minutes as I stood in my shorts, sipping coffee, and then went back to nonchalantly eating the wood. I couldn't yell him away or menace him by lunging at him. Barelegged and unbooted, I didn't want to prod him and risk a bite, so I stood there and watched him until he'd had his fill.

My first instinct after he left was to follow him down the stairs and try and hit him with a rock. I even went so far as to wrap my fingers around one about the size and shape of big pear before it occurred to me that I had no desire to kill it or anything else just then. And I didn't care if it did gnaw on the tower. Job security for me; every summer I could be assured of at least a few easy weeks out on Diablo.

Diablo receives more than it's share of random visitors. The hike in is a bit over four miles and barely climbs 2,000 feet from the trail head at Elk Summit. That's the old ranger station where Norman Maclean worked his one summer for the forest service in 1919. He was a lookout too, up Graves Peak. Back then getting in to Elk Summit involved a pretty serious trip over the Bitterroots from Hamilton. These days people drive into the campground there and take day hikes up to the tower. Some people ride their horses up. It's too easy and I get my fill of visitors.

A few days after my climb the lazy summer drifted in and wrapped me in its thrall. On lookout the rhythm and mood of the days comes from the weather. It washes over me and takes me along. There had been a few cold foggy days. The clouds settle on the mountain tops and fold the lookout into arms of rain and sameness. When the days are cool, long and misty, I love nothing better than sitting close by the wood stove, drinking more coffee and reading books. The fog and rain outside erase all traces of any world other than the one inside me. The hush of fire and wind lull me into a melting slow daydream where my thoughts revolve and dangle around me like shining pieces on a mobile. After a few days this builds its own hangover momentum which lasts even when the weather has cleared. Solitude is a drug.

I can't remember now what I was doing when I first spotted the hiker cresting the ridge a hundred yards away. It was probably nothing important, but at the time I was annoyed. Sometimes I don't mind visitors, but that day I was grumpy.

This hiker was a kid, a teenager. He was wearing a neon green hat and moving fast, fishing paraphernalia protruding and hanging from his small blue pack. A few minutes behind him another hiker showed up, another kid, wearing a hunter's orange cap. The first one waited for the second by the helipad, a sort

of level place with a big yellow 'H' painted over the rocks. The two of them picked their way over scattered broken boulders and clumps of still green bear grass. I stepped out onto the catwalk, a bit lightheaded from drinking too much coffee and standing up so quick. I gripped the railing and angled my face into the cool wind so it would blow the hair out of my eyes. "Morning," I said. I didn't feel too friendly and was still dizzy.

"Hi," said the first one up, the shorter one with all the fishing gear. "Is this the trail down to Duck Lake?" he asked, pointing along the ridge past the tower and then down to the lake.

"There is no trail past here," I said. "Just keep following the ridge out and around." I gestured with my arm, making a half circle around the far side of the lake. Neither boy was paying too much attention. "It's steep, so watch your step. Keep out of the chutes. They look like short cuts, but they'll take you a long time to work down. You might save time coming up the middle one, but not going down. They're too steep." I think I might have even said it again. The wind kept picking up in whistling lunges, hissing through the beargrass and making me shiver. We all stood there not talking for a minute or so and then I asked "Are you by yourselves?"

"No," the quick one with the green hat said. "Our moms and dads are back there." He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. I figured the kids would wait for their folks. I knew when the whole gang got here I was going to have to invite them up for a look around. I looked into the cab through the window to make sure it was half way picked up. Most people are curious for a tour, not that there is much to see inside; a bed, a desk, a tiny wood stove, a propane one for cooking, and the alidade, which is a round map with a rotating sight to pinpoint smokes. The view is something else, even just up the one flight of stairs at Diablo. The world becomes a hemisphere of wonder.

By the time I looked back these kids were already walking past the tower, pausing to glance over the brink of the steep cliff before moving on. The short one with all the fishing stuff was in front again and gaining ground on his friend. "Just follow the ridge out and around, it is the safest way." I called after them, pointing out along the ridge. "OK," one of them yelled, but they didn't look back. I walked around the catwalk, lazily scanning the ridges and slopes for wisps of smoke, watching the sky for weather, stretching and talking to myself. Another lone hiker appeared over the ridge crest. This one was thicker than the first two and when he got closer I could see he had graying hair. He got about halfway along the ridge to the tower when another hiker popped up. The other father. It seemed strange to me that they all hiked so spread out.

The first one got close enough to hail me. "Hello. Have You seen two boys with fishing poles?"

"You just missed them," I said. "Two or three minutes ago." I moved around the catwalk and could see them farther along the ridge. "They're right over there," I said. They were closer to the edge than I would have been heading for the lake. He nodded and shed his pack.

The other father caught up, dropped his pack and stood there talking quietly with his friend. After a few more minutes, one mom, and then the other appeared. They all sat together and passed around food, joking and talking in the sun just below the tower. I sat on the catwalk and made conversation, declining their offers of trailmix and peanut butter sandwiches, but gladly accepting the offered apple and celery sticks. On a lookout, fresh food goes fastest and is the heaviest to replenish. It's always a welcome gift. The best way to bribe my good will is with about five pounds of perfect black cherries.

After they ate, they came up for a tour. I showed them around. The moms asked me about how I lived and what I did, the dads about game I had

seen, how many deer, how many elk bucks and does, bulls and cows. I showed them on a topographical map how they should head for the lake. I told them they might consider working their way around the inside of the basin and back over to the main trail, bypassing the steep climb back up to the lookout and then back down to the trailhead. "It might save you some climbing," I said, and I knew it would save me from having visitors again, though by now I liked them all right. Somehow we got on the subject of the cliffs and the steep avalanche chutes. I told them about my adventure, and made it clear that the ridge was the easiest and safest way to get to the lake.

They left and I lost myself in some project or other. Maybe I was writing letters or reading. I really can't remember how I passed the early afternoon. It doesn't matter. The wind would come up and wash everything in that constant white noise of air moving over wood and glass, racing over uneven rocks with little whistling hisses and souging whisper throated through the near treetops. It falls into odd-timed rhythms like waves. The current lulls me into strange eddy line daydreams.

In my vision that afternoon, I was walking down a narrow canyon of red rocks. Everything was falling into deeper shadow and I was alone. Above me were wheeling birds with long slender dark wings. Their cries came down to me, faintly echoing now and again and made me think there were people near by. yelling something, my name? I sat up in my chair, convinced I had heard some one calling my name. I looked at the radio, waiting a second, and then stood up. I poured some water and drank it, and walked out onto the catwalk with binoculars to have a look around.

After all these seasons on lookout I have developed an intuition. Something won't feel right, and I'll go scan the valleys. Sometimes I'll pick out a thin smoke just poking up. One time I was watching a spot and saw the smoke

start to tendrill up into the sky. By the time I'd radioed it in, the fire was really rolling. Maybe my subconscious eye caught a glimpse of the smoke before and by the time the event filtered up to my active thought it was laying down. I have no explanation for it. It's just a hunch, a feeling.

This time when something felt wrong I stood out of the wind and glassed in all the country between me and the Bitterroots. Nothing. On a whim I sat down on the catwalk and hung my legs over, resting the binoculars on the railing and tried to find the people on lake shore.

The wind died and I thought I heard the faint shriek of a Red-tailed hawk. I looked up but couldn't see anything. When I looked back toward the lake, I caught a glimpse of something bright orange down near the base of one of the cliffs. I focused the binoculars and recognized the second kid, the taller one with a hunter's orange cap on. He was walking up a long diagonal crevasse, looking around for something. A little ways behind him I picked up another tiny figure, the other kid I thought, his friend. I began to wonder if they had taken my haphazard advice and maybe tried to come up one of the chutes. Maybe they'd decided to try and work around the inside of the basin and not come back up over the top of the lookout. I sort of hoped this is what they were doing.

I scanned the rest of my country, no smokes, and, with nothing more urgent to do, I settled in to watch them. The one with the hunter's cap on kept stopping and pointing up the cliff and then down it. The other one, his friend, would stare at him and then point in another direction. Every so often either one or both of them would cup their hands and yell something. I couldn't hear them over the wind, only see the gesture and watch the motions. I kept making up stories for my self about what they were doing. Maybe they were looking for someplace to fill their water bottles. They were standing together near a place where the rock was wet with the trickle of water from high above at the corner of

a small plateau. I remembered the plateau from when I scrambled and clawed my way up from the lake. I remember that everything was much steeper than it looked from where I was sitting now. It still looked pretty steep.

I don't know when I first got the sense that something was really wrong. I noticed something green and blue in the rocks a little bit above them, straight up the cliff wall. They kept coming almost under it and then moving away. I was getting nervous. I wanted to holler down and ask "What's that thing up on the rocks?" but I knew they could never hear me over the wind and distance. They probably couldn't even see the thing. That's how steep the wall was. Maybe the boys had dropped something from above and were looking for it. It sure seemed like they were looking for something. The green thing could be the fishing boy's hat. That's why he wasn't wearing it. What were they yelling? I kept watching, trying to make sense out of it all and wondering if I was going to have to climb out on the cliffs to pick up the hat and whatever else it was. They stood together, pointing up the cliff and then down where the dark slickrock trickle of water disappeared into a brush field of alder and meafy. The one with the hunting hat shrugged and pointed up the rocks again. The other one pointed down and started hurrying back along the crevasse. If they were looking for a place to get a drink, they sure were making a big deal out of it. I wondered where their parents were.

I don't know why I decided to radio the ranger station then. I told them some hikers might be having a problem down near Duck Lake. The dispatcher asked me if I could hike down with a radio and find out. She said the search and rescue helicopter would have to be paid for by them. They would have to specifically request it. I told her It would take me two hours or so to get down to where they were. I didn't feel much like hiking right then. I knew we had a ship working on the district, and my idea was that it could just fly by on a close recon

and make sure everything was OK. I was vetoed. So I just sat back to watch some more.

By this time the second one, who was wearing no hat, had made it to the bottom of the lower cliff and was hurrying along the top of the brush field. He came to the spot where the trickle of water met the brush and he jumped down into it, disappearing. I went back to my two kids looking for a place to get a drink of water theory, just for a second. The figure in the brush stood up and threw his head back and wailed, a long piercing cry I could hear all the way back up as it echoed off the cliffs and cut the wind. In that single eloquent gesture and primal raw note, I knew all of what had happened. The one still up on the rock lay down and kicked his legs. The one standing in the brush clutching his head was not the other teenager. It was his father. In my mind I saw the short boy with all his fishing stuff hanging and bouncing around him hurrying down the steep rocks. I know he was intent on the lake and the mystery of trout lurking beneath its shimmering waters. He wants to be the first one there. Somewhere along the edge he misses a step, twists and fights, clawing rocks and moss, but he surrenders at last to gravity. Maybe he skids a while, and then bounces once, twice, before taking entirely to the air for his last arc before impact. Hidden from my sight in the brush by the feet of the wailing man, the father tearing at his hair and clothes, lay the ruined flesh of what once was his son, the hurrying fisherman. The father tore off his long sleeved flannel shirt and knelt with it into the brush. He covered his son and stood weeping and bent.

I radioed the Ranger Station and told them it was a medical emergency. I told them the people requested a helicopter. No one asked how I knew this. I didn't volunteer any information. I figured that if the kid had only been hurt, no matter how badly, the people would have been furious with directed activity. There would have been something, no matter how desperate, to do. When the

wind lulled down I yelled "Are you OK?" knowing he was not, but still hoping, still wanting to believe that everything was going to be OK. Through my binoculars I watched the grieving man, whirl in circles, searching for the source of my voice. I saw him finally remember me. He looked up and waved his arms, yelling "Help. Help. help..." the last one choked off and he slumped to the ground. The wind rose and fell like a wave, washing everything into a blunt silence again. When it broke still again I heard him yelling "God, God, why? He's dead." over and over. The wind came up and I was unable to stop watching the silent scene of private grief.

At times it looked like he was dancing and laughing and I wanted it to be true for him. I wanted it true for me. I wanted to imagine everything had happened differently, and that now things were fine. If I looked away and looked back, I could almost imagine that's how it was. Say he finds his son alive, shaken up, hurt bad, but alive. He was just knocked out. When the father covered him with his shirt, the boy's eyes flutter. He calls out for his father. Everything is going to be OK and now he is elated. If I had just started watching the scene then I could have believed all of that. From afar ecstasy and anguish look so close together. But I couldn't blur them now for him or for me. I knew too much. I watched and nothing changed.

Later, when the second father had come, led by his own son who he hugged long and tight while I watched empty and short of breath from far above, I managed to yell the word "HELICOPTER?" raising my tone at the end like a question, I hoped. The second father stood looking around for a second and then waved his arms twice at me. "Helicopter," he yelled, and again, nodding his head in giant slow nods. I yelled "OK," having no way of communicating that it was on the way. Closer to the lake I could see the one boy left, huddled

with his mother and the dead boys mother. Slowly the three of them worked toward the fathers.

Near where the body was I could see the two men, sometimes folded together in desperate embrace, sometimes the grieving father walking in circles, and clutching his head or tangling his hands in his t-shirt front. His wordless hurt spilled up the long rocks to my ears. The wind was gone taking its numbing comfortable silence and careless daydreams a long way away.

Helicopters came and went. I balanced the binoculars on the catwalk railing and watched everything. I saw the EMTs land and work their way over to the body. I saw them talk to themselves and radio the ranger station. I don't know what they said. I couldn't listen. I watched them wrap the boy's body in a yellow sleeping bag and sling it in a black cargo net to the side of the lake where the chopper could land. I watched the helpless mother and father fly out with their son. I watched the other family hike the long slow way up the ridge. I watched them come with no idea what I could say. I couldn't remember what I had told the boys in the first place. I hoped I really had told them to stay out of the chutes. That's how I want to remember it. That's how I need to remember it. Still doubt takes me by the throat. I can't say for sure what I told them. I may have told them, bragging, of my climbing adventure. I can't say. I just don't know.

My solitude flashed fast into isolation. I was left alone. I thought about hiking out and taking some days off, but there was no where I really could go. My family and my few deep close friends were thousands of miles away, too far for the touch I knew I'd need to feel warm or safe again. I watched the other three come, the unbroken family, slow and cautious; they at least had each other. I didn't know what I could say to them, or even if I wanted to see them at all, and yet at the same time I needed someone to help me sort everything out.

Someone to tell me it wasn't my fault, and that I couldn't have done anything more, that I did right. The family stayed low on the ridge and didn't come up to the tower. They called out from down in the trees and were gone. I was left in the last of the days sunlight, watching the long shadows fill the valleys and climb the ridges, touching the sky at last and bringing the stars out by ones and threes and thousands. There was nothing I could do. I was alone, the desolate night coming on, strange and unobscured.

A few days later late in the morning I saw another hiker coming along the ridge. His head was down and he was moving hard. Behind him several others, also walking fast followed. I stepped out on the deck and waited. The one in front bulled right up the stairs without even a pause and stopped inches from me, face to face. "I guess you know me," he said. And I did: The dead boy's father. He opened the door to my tower and went in. I followed him feeling like an intruder. The others came, friends of his, and another boy; his other son. "My only son, now," he told me, his voice wavering and breaking. He hugged me hard, his arms desperate. "I'm so sorry," I said again and again, hugging him back, a stranger. "I'm so sorry for you, for your family..." I could barely speak. I was shaking. I had no idea why they had come. I sat on one of the low counters, next to the propane stove. I had been cooking some rice for my lunch and it smelled almost done, like fresh popcorn. I turned it off and folded my arms across my chest. The others sat around the tower and stared at me.

"Tell us what happened," the father. I felt like I was on trial. The feelings of my own guilt or culpability welled up and threatened to explode. These were not things to be eased here. I could not take absolution from this man or his family. His grief was immediate. His energies were needed to heal himself, not some outsider, some observer. I knew I wasn't to blame here. All I did was

watch. That is my job. So I told him everything I could remember, the way I could remember it. We walked out on the catwalk and I showed him where I saw them, and where I sat. I went through everything I said on the radio, everything I could remember. The father and I both shook our heads at how narrowly they had missed each other up at the tower before lunch, and inside the little voices started up, asking me if maybe I couldn't have talked with them for another few minutes. Or maybe shown them a map. Or maybe given them one, or maybe been more friendly, something, anything. I'd been down that road a thousand times already, each time wrestling those voices and all the others back under the murky waters.

I keep writing myself into blind alleys with this thing, losing my place in the shifting sand between what happened and what I wanted to believe happened. Memory is tricky business. It mutates to fit with current expectations. Like perception, memory conforms to the current version of a revised self identity. The information is reshaped to fit the person I now believe myself to be. Sometimes we call this gaining perspective, other times distortion. I don't know what the rules are for seeing the truth.

Even under the best of circumstances, no two witnesses will remember events in exactly the same way. These were not the best of circumstances. There are no others against whom to check myself. There are no facts here other than those my memory re-produces. No thing is truer than anything else. On lookout, I grapple for a way to hold things together so the world makes sense. I explore the terrain of my beliefs, trying to order the world and find my place in it. This arcane cartography of the soul reveals my need to believe in things I don't understand: there is too much world beyond the horizons of my knowing.

I tried to focus on what he was saying to me, and on his son. the both spoke of their Christian faith and it seemed to be holding them together. At least they wanted it to, and that was enough. This God's will business gave them comfort,, a foothold to climb out of this sudden storm. Though It is not my way of ordering the world, I do not begrudge them their light. Faith is a willful act of belief. It carries us into the unknown and helps us begin remaking order. I envied them their certainty. I wondered about my own.

The tragedy in all this is not that the boy, Ethan, lost his life, but that his mother and father lost their son, that his sister and brother lost their brother, and that all his friends lost their friend. Tragedy is for we the living who must carry on in the aftermath of events, recovering like water after a stone tears through the gentle surface. The Ripples rise and fall back to smooth, eventually, The stone contained and unseen, but not forgotten. That summer afternoon I was sitting where one of the ripples touched. it was enough. even ripples can move the shore.

Face to face with that sweating man, his grief and his urgent faith, I feel my sense of place in the world skip a beat. I no longer recognized the topography of my internal landscape. My map was gone and the world around me shimmered strange. I do not know what to believe or how to believe. I don't know what to say. "I'm sorry," I tell him. "I'm sorry," I tell them all as they start off down the mountain. I say it again and again, but I am alone now. I'm talking to myself.

Siddhartha, Sasquatch and Science Fiction

Season after season, early summer until steady rain and snow fall, I come back to the high country. I leave off whatever else I had been doing where ever else I had ended up, and return to the Bitterroot country to ready myself for another season in the backcountry, high up on the mountain top in the tower I call my own. Last year, I didn't have far to travel for my return, having wintered in Montana. It was the summer after serious fires, and I was curious what my country, the view from the tower windows, would look like with the fresh reddish fringed black amoebas of fire scars on the green ridges.

From up high, the world seemed pretty much unchanged. The huge fires of the summer before, the hazed air and unsettling electric expectations having created in my memory a version of the entire world burned over. And though twenty odd thousand acres or so is a big hunk of land, from my vantage point, very little was really changed. The eight thousand acres that burned around Bear Mountain were just a speck, a drop in the bucket of all the vast miles of roadless country, almost all of that country had burned over before in the fire 1910. The fire sent up a column of smoke so thick it could be seen in Buffalo New York. Indeed, the column of smoke was so thick it blocked enough sun to make them need to turn on the streetlights. So the story goes any way. Since I am no historian, and seldom bothered by actual facts, I choose to believe in it and gain the amusement its attendant possibilities provide for me.

Perhaps this choosing of beliefs is at the core of my fascination with extended periods of solitude in the wilds. Not just any wild areas, though I love them all, but mountain tops with lookout towers, vantage points with far flung horizons. I like to see the sky all around, a vast hemisphere of wonder always in subtle and dynamic motion while tides of light and time pass over me. And then, as the currents of my days slipstream around and through me, I contemplate possibilities. I wonder what is true, what I can believe, and what the implications, the consequences and rewards of altering the vector on my particular momentums of beliefs.

The way I got it we make things real by believing, by investing them with our inertia of certainty. The trick comes from our skepticism. This power of disbelief stems from an unwillingness to accept and make true some facet of experience and imagination. Society imposes its boundaries of convention. because of doubt, constraint, convention imposed externally by the boundaries of society. What other people think and believe affects what it is we are able to believe and think in that if something is thought or known as true to another, then the likelihood of its being true for us is greater because there is precedent. Like it or not our tendency as a species is toward the herd mind. Conventional reality, those beliefs which are accepted as baseline by most people is really a consensus, an agreement for us to coexist and participate in a simultaneous environment. Those individuals who entertain beliefs too far from the center of the consensus momentum, the direction toward which the inertia of our beliefs is impelled, are considered by societal jury weird, crazy, or, in extreme, insane.

Insanity, then, is merely an imposition of a divergent system of belief, whose interfaces and overlaps with the boundaries of consensus conventional reality, or normal, or real (to express it in extremely prejudiced terms) are exclusive and allow no participation in the cultural milieu. People will say to me

"Don't you go crazy up there? I know I would go totally insane after a week." I always want to answer "Of course I go insane. What other alternatives are there?"

On lookout, after a long series of days, the boundaries of what I could believe true begins to shimmer. There are no others against whom to check my version of ongoing events. Lights moving across the evening stars must be aeroplane, or barring that, satellites or other forms of terrestrial cosmic debris. But what if hidden among my expectations, a space craft of unknown origin is travels by us like some wayward freeway off ramp to another trailer park against a scenic backdrop. If they were around, they'd show themselves, the argument goes in some circles (the circles where people talk seriously about such things. Their presence would be made manifest to all of us. Given the way our species manages its resources and conducts itself socially, I choose to believe that the continued lack of large scale contact with extraterrestrial life forms is the most conclusive evidence of their existence. Too often when I am listening to the news on the lookout radio I wish I had the option of withdrawing my membership in my species. I wish I had some other planet to go to. As it is I must be content with my ritual of withdrawal to the fringes, season after season.

Every day I hike down the water trail to the spring. It's about a half mile, give or take, and down hill all the way there. The big fire of '94 burned right up to one side of the little draw my spring runs down, jumped over in a few places, but left most of the wet little glade intact. I'm glad for this because the next nearest water place was well over a mile away, down farther and a lot steeper back up. Last summer, the one just after the big fire, there was still a bit of snow down in the draw. I could boot ski my way the last fifty yards or so to where the water seeped out of the ground and ran over moss and rocks to collect in a

pool. At one end of the pool a lookout some years back had put in an iron pipe maybe four inches around. The water runs through it like a faucet tap wide open at the beginning of the season, and a bare trickle in the driest part near the end. At the end of the pipe the ground drops away enough that a water cubie, a five gallon plastic jug shaped like a cube with a handle, can sit and fill almost all the way to the top. My own is lashed with parachute cord to a pack board, some army surplus thing made of wood and canvas. The straps and canvas back that keeps the wood from riding vertebra into rawness, is bleached almost khaki from the olive drab it started out. Year after year of toil in hot summer, hauling water or whatever on some lookouts back had left their mark. My own sweat mingled almost daily, my salt and theirs leeching out of the mortal engine and remaining long after I too have departed for the wherever else I'll go instead of here. Others have done as I have done, and though I am denied the novelty of being the first lookout on Bear Mountain, It is quite possible that I will be the last.

Usually I go for water in the late afternoon. When i get back to the tower the sun is low and the shadows spring forth building for when when the sun has ceased it's watchfulness, moved on to tend other acres of its vast holding. Night grows when the shadows touch the sky. The mountains fade on the horizon into the mythic blue, the very fabric of dreams, and fantastic possibilities. After my walks I lean on the catwalk railing, surrounded by the ethereal twilight. In that light I believe in glimpses the other worlds. Portals to the fringes of my imagination fling open. In that light I let myself believe in almost anything, even Elves. I think to my self "There is something here I am supposed to remember, some way to move across my believing into any of the worlds I imagine." I will try until all the stars come, but in the end i can only turn to the slumber and shelter of my dreams for such escapes.

The water in my spring comes mostly from snow melt runoff. It collects below the ground up on the shoulder of the mountain and following some bedrock vein down part way to where it can push up through the dirt. The water is sweet and crisp cold. It tastes better than anything I have ever drunk. When I walk down I pause to look around and take in the still music of this place. Sheltered from the wind it is always cool in this little glade, lush with wildflowers, whose names I have never really bothered to learn (save for the purple one I call Lupines, and something else that has the radish flavor of a Glacier Lily.) Many times I will spy elk or mule deer there, watering. We share the place, and don't bother each other too much, and I am always careful to wait my turn. The wind sighs through the tree tops and boughs and hushes in huge waves that fill my ears and empty them down to the slowing drums of my own heart pulsing the rhythm of my life. Sometimes I see bear tracks there and a few times I have found fresh cat tracks, bigger than my fist and so fresh they were just beginning to seep full of water when I bent to fill my jug.

At the seasons onset, the jug fills in the space of four or five slow breaths, but in the parched mid august days, it takes long enough to stand a stretch the kinks from my neck and back. I'll work the tight muscles of my hamstrings a little looser and smush a few mosquitos. Long enough to crouch and touch my mouth to the water just above the pipe and drink my fill until my teeth hurt. Long enough for me to think think we back in the world take our water for granted. We turn taps and out it comes for us to wash with, to rinse dishes, and run ashes or spiders down our drains. Sometimes we fill glasses to drink, and only have a few sips and pour the rest down the drain. We make our coffee and tea with it, we rinse the remains of whatever it is we just drank from the glass. We make ice cubes to cool our booze, to pour our Pepsi over, but it's always is there for the having. We expect it and don't ever think of missing it.

Just now, writing this I had to get up and fill a large glass with water as cold from the tap in my cabin as I could let it run. I drank it in one long steady swallowing, waiting until the faintest twinges of headache and dehydration fade away. I filled it again and walked back over to my desk and drank half of it off again.

Here's something. It's early in the season, say the first day i hike in, some time in June. I stumble down the water trail and crouch at the spring. My hands on either side of the pipe and my feet on the stream bank, lowering myself in pushup position until my lips were below the surface and slowly drinking my fill. Far above me a hawk's pweet tears the air and the wind rises from it's lull. When my teeth ached from the snowmelt water, and my belly was full, I raised up and met eyes with a small doe mule deer. I hadn't noticed it when I stumbled down the trail, oblivious to all save my deep need to drink. We stared for a long while. She stood with her feet in the mud around the seep, the water by her feet pooling and running down to where I drank. I could scent her musk, mingling with the cedar sweet and balsam fir in the air, the rich wet dirt smell I wish was my own (though I know in time it certainly will be). As I watched, she lowered her head, flicking her ears, turning them to point at me while her own tiny lips kissed the water.

Desert cultures acknowledge the sacredness of water. The springs and wells, the caravanserais, oases, are holy places, and none are enemies there. All water is to be shared, and quarrels set aside. Water is what makes up most of this exquisite engine of bone and muscle. Just as most of matter is empty space, the vast dimensions between the meandering electrons and other atomic particles, so is most of the space within the thin cell membrane of our tissues and organs and fluids, the cytoplasmic realm, fluid; water. Indeed, most of our big old goofy world is covered with water, made of water, linked to water,

dependent on water. The deepest rhythms of life on planet earth revolve around water. Tom Robbins hypothesized that human beings were merely devices created by water for the purpose of moving itself from one place to another, and I cannot refute his assertion. Many times I have felt myself to be nothing more than a rollercoaster car for water in this amusement park world.

Back to the doe and the early summer afternoon. While she drank her ears and eyes never left me. We drank together, her wary and me ecstatic to be participating in a moment which would never leave my memory. I held myself close to the water, balanced on my toes and palms. The sweat from my long first hike up beneath the static weight of my possessions forces from my pores a sour smell. I could smell it, but the breeze eddy carried her scent to me, and mine away while I hovered over the water.

I shiver, the wet back of my tee shirt clammy along my spine and cold along my ribs where it hung heavy and dark. My neck itches and my legs and shoulders quiver. All my energy used to get myself up the trail and then down to the spring to fill my canteen and drink away the dust and thirst of a long climb made by a man grown softer than he had imagined before setting out. I raise myself slowly, locking out my elbows like the last shaky pushup. The doe raises her head and stares, her whole dappled coat electric with vigilance. I see the precision of her muscles working beneath the supple skin, flexing subtly in anticipation, ready to bound away from whatever direction danger was sensed. I don't want to spook her, I didn't want the moment to conclude, but my body is cramping, aching and I have no reason to hold out so I slowly rock my weight back over my knees and stand.

She's off, fluidly hopping like a huge misshapen rabbit up the steep gully. As ever when watching deer or elk or bears or anything large which moves with grace, I wish I could run so fast up and away through the dense forest. I shiver

in my sweated through clothes, and hurry to fill my canteen before heading back up to the tower and the arduous task of opening the shutters and sweeping out dust and debris and readying my place for another season under the sun and clouds. I will not pretend to have had some telepathic rapport with the animal, nor at the time, or even now was it a particularly profound spiritual crossroad in my life. I accepted it then as something special, but an ordinary kind of special, part of just what I expect about where I was.

One curious fact about the seasons after big fires is that mushrooms of all sorts, particularly the elusive and delectable morrell which hold so many in it's thrall, tend to pop up in the burned over black areas of ash and charred duff. To my taste, morrells are fine, but I do not jones for them the way some do. My own peculiar angulation toward fungus fixation resides more in the world of the psychoactive ones. The soma of hallucinatory Alice in Wonderland and sorcerer Don Juan and Aldous Huxley fame once particularly impelled me, back before I thought so much about thinking so much and got paranoid about getting paranoid, or something like that. I periodically scanned the protruding fungal bodies for some that looked familiar enough to consider. Morells I could discern readily and I do enjoy foraging food and feast from the world around. I'll eat flowers and make tea from tender pine needles. I eat berries and snared game and caught fish.

Mushrooms have always struck me as off somehow, and the mushroom hunters I encountered this year were particularly off. Shifty eyed and scruffy, they rarely even nodded as they hurried past me on the lower parts of my long trail in. Whether their furtiveness was due to the illegality of their gathering salable quantities of the mushrooms without permit on national forest land, or from some shifting and psychotic deep recess of their souls I will never know. I steered clear of them and was grateful the arduous hike up the trail to my tower

deterred all but the most singularly determined hikers. People who made it up to where I was usually intended to come up there and see me. The four thousand vertical feet from bottom to top tended to push most people in other directions.

Getting water one afternoon I noticed a spot of color nestled in the rotting deadfall and luxurious moss up near the head of the draw. I stowed my water pack by the spring and picked my way up and there came face to face with an enormous specimen of the *Amanita Muscaria*, the rouge black angel of death. Red and black capped and spotted with small circles of white, the photogenic Black Angel adorns the cover of many books on mycology and toxicology.

This mushroom has some history. The hookah-smoking caterpillar in Lewis Carrolls' chronicle of little Alice falling down the rabbit hole most likely sat astride a specimen of *Amanita* and indeed has been so illustrated in many editions of *Through the Looking Glass*. Let's go back farther still, to the days before the Celtic isles were subjugated. One band of the Druidic tribes the fearsome Blue Picts indulged in a solemn ritual involving the Black Angel of Death. The night before battle they would gather by their war fires and dance, chanting and painting their bodies blue. They would eat a preparation made from the *Amanita*, until frenzied out of their minds and one foot gone into the netherworlds. And when the dawn came and their frenzy was peaking, they would march naked save for their blue paint and weapons across the moors to the wailing and keening of pipes and the weird droning of huge battle harps high on the fens. Their strings the winds motion would vibrate in eerie discords. The Picts would fight their enemies until they were hacked to pieces, and those pieces stilled. They inspired superstitious awe among other the so-called

pagan tribes. As warriors they had no peer. They were never subjugated as a tribe. They never surrendered or gave up. They fought to the death. Indeed, when the Roman empire stretched forth into Britannia, their Picts were at the vanguard of the wild barbarians against who Emperor Hadrian command the construction of his wall. Beyond this wall the empire ceased.

The painted Picts and their Amanita fueled tactics inspired fear and dread in the Romans, many of whom were recruited along the way from conquered peoples. Further, the Picts were able to break the shield wall and make vulnerable the Roman legion to defeat. They pitted their ancient rituals and beliefs hard against the technological machine of so-called civilization and broke the power of the tide, for a time. They placed their beliefs in opposition to a world they saw as going wrong.

It made me wonder. If these people made the mushroom such a powerful part of how they believed the world worked, what purpose or end could I in my own small way put to it? While carried water back up the trail I created versions of myself as a Pictish warrior, fighting for a way to live beyond the walls of convention. On lookout, try to find the lines of my expectations and then cross them. In my mind I paint one version of my self blue and stand outside the walls to face down the corruption of the empire and it's cancerous growth. I watch to see what happens. Perhaps I could employ a bit of the old way to help me gather strength for my fight. Or, maybe it would be satisfying to explore my curiosity, too look through the lenses of those mushroom glasses and see how my world looks. Or even merely to set my self adrift for a few hours (or days?) from the constraints of my expectations of reality, to explore a wee bit beyond the perimeters of my beliefs. I can talk myself into just about anything.

Entertainment options on lookout can be somewhat limited. Now, I knew a thing or two about hallucinogens. I thought about eating the Amanita and

wondered what could happen. I got curiouser and curiouser. It could be fun, I thought. Maybe a sunny warm morning in a mountain top meadow, wildflowers all around and no responsibilities might do me some good. Maybe blow a few cobwebs out of the corners of my mind,, open me to some transcendent realization. It might be fun, or I might taste THE FEAR which I wouldn't describe even if I could. I might end up gibbering and crouching behind a tree stump somewhere. Maybe it wouldn't be any fun at all. Couple all that with the possibility of my surpassing the toxic dosage inadvertently. I wondered "Did those Picts eat it straight, or was it part of some secret concoction containing a catalyst to neutralize the heart paralyzing toxins? There were many things here I did not know.

Every time I went for water I looked over at the almost glowing spot. If I stared long enough I could imagine it pulsing with energy. Maybe it would be good for me to eat it, to tap it's mystery, to tune in, turn on, and drop for a while. And maybe I might go mad or die. I am not sure what comment it makes upon me that I considered this as a viable choice on a daily basis. I kept thinking about it, though seldom after I had made my way back to the tower with my water. My thoughts were instigated by proximity. Something in the Amanita itself wanted me to eat it. I know I hadn't remembered any of the Pict stuff before I saw the mushroom that first afternoon.

Meanwhile I had been hearing something moving through the woods, just out of my sight, for the last few weeks. I felt something watching me. It was something big. I could tell by the sound of large branches cracking and brush moving away from the wind. But I couldn't see it. I am plenty wary of bears, though (foolishly perhaps) unafraid. I refuse to believe in me getting mauled or eaten. I won't admit it as a possibility in my world. Besides, the way I got it

figured, I won't have much chance to worry about it while I am being eaten, and afterwards it won't much matter. I take some care and get on with my doings.

I didn't think it was a bear, but there was something around the mountain those days. Something different. Maybe a big cat, or a wolverine. The usually boisterous coyotes were subdued in the evening twilight. The small incessant creature noises would quit suddenly and hold their silence and then return in trickles of tentative sound. Something unfamiliar, besides me, was about. My tower is on the northern verge of the Selway Bitterroot wilderness. This is an enormous roadless area in the heart of the Idaho mountain country. Wolves move down the mountain corridor from Canada. Mountain lions roam for certain. People tell all sorts of stories about seeing just about anything. Some of the old timers, the packers and guides claim they've seen grizzly out there. One old guy with greasy nicotine yellowed hair told me he'd seen a giant albino griz fishing in the moonlight out by Isaac Lake. He looked me right in the eye without blinking once the whole time he told me his story. He wouldn't let me go. I almost believed him. Another time I heard some scientists on the radio talking about the possibility of a polar bear coming down during one of the cold winters. As is usually the case with scientists, they were disagreeing about how long one could survive. One said not possible, the other said sure, why not? I think I liked his voice the best.

And there are other tales too, two-legged human creatures who roam the ridges and steal from outfitter camps. Refugees from Warm Springs, escapees, drifters, woodsmen, methjunkies, freemen, all kinds of crazies. These two legged curs slinking around where I was gave me the horror movie shivers, not the lions and bears and wolves. So I took to carrying my hunting knife when I went for my rambles. I quit using the trails, moving with as much stealth as I could. At first was really clumsy, thrashing through the bush. I never really

paid much attention to how much noise I made when I'd let my mind wander and my feet plod along. After I got the hang of focusing on moving carefully, it was fun. I got good at moving almost silently through the underbrush, picking my way from granite outcropping to boulder, waiting and then hopping onto a blown down tree. waiting. Pulling myself up through huckleberry patches slowly, my fingers laced in thick beargrass. The trick, or one of them any way is to take my time, to only move a few steps, to listen and move when the wind comes up. In those pauses I could here other things move and pause too. Sometimes I imagined I heard something stopping right after I did. I'd try to wait it out, but I am human and impatient in the end.

I wasn't scared, or nervous. I didn't feel paranoid. I am getting more jittery now thinking back about this time than I felt then. It was sort of a game, just a part of how I was living. Living alone so far from any one requires a degree of caution and thoughtfulness about what to do before it's done. I also have to trust my instincts, and to do that I have to use them.

The rhythm of my days had picked up a few stray back beats, but that's just part of how expect my days on lookout to go. It's why I don't get bored. I am too curious. Everyday I went for water, and everyday, I studied the Amanita and contemplated my options. I decided not to go into town after one two week hitch, lengthening my stay out toward a month. A month without seeing any one else. I wanted to stay out a long time and see what might happen. Solitude is strange, addictive magic. It has its own rhythms and rules.

One morning I woke up with the lightening of the sky, hours before sunrise. I don't usually remember my dreams, and this morning was no exception, save that I know I had just had one that was involved and vivid, and somehow unsettling. Once in a while I wake up really early and am wide awake. I'll lie in bed and let my mind wander, enjoying the warmth of my sleeping bag and the

stillness of the morning, but today I felt like getting up. I started some water for coffee, but turned it off and decided I would wander down and have a bite of the Amanita, just a lick and a taste, and see what might happen. I drank the warm water and pulled on some warm clothes. Even in August the top of a mountain is chilly in the dawn. The sky started to break open into the hints of color that ride the long waves of sunlight over the curve of the earth. The stars still bright in the west were fading in the east and little tendrils of golden rose traced the jagged peaks up past the headwaters of the Lochsa. It was going to be a beautiful day.

My water jug was topped off from the evening before run so I made my way with only a canteen. I figured to have a little ramble through the woods, then watch the sunrise from out on a rock ledge in one of the cirque basins south of the tower. I'd wait there for the Amanita to come on. All the way down the trail into the abating twilight of the dawn forest I thought about the mushroom and my eating of it. I wasn't sure what to expect, but somewhere I had convinced myself just a little bit wouldn't kill me, and I could play it by ear from there. I am sometimes given over to ill considered impulse. I make odd choices. I am not always careful. I like to get lost, to go new places and see if I can figure my way back.

Thoreau cautions against the constraints of our well worn paths, even if they be good paths. They blind us somehow to the mystery of the forest. By taking myself out from under the inertia of my complacency, out past the ruts of my security and comfortable expectations, I will have a chance to better see what really is around me, and not just what I so safely suppose is there. I want to see the trees and the forest, and everything else all at once.

When I started down the last, steepest pitch into the draw that holds the spring and the Amanita I feel something. I stop and listen. I hear nothing. It's

about halfway between night and light, in that curiously reversed morning twilight, where the shadows shrink imperceptibly rather than grow. I slowed my breathing way down and moved on, expecting to find some deer or elk, or even the goofy little bull moose watering. At the fill spot I squat down and uncap my canteen, readying it. Up by the mushroom, I see a big shadowy shape. It moves back and forth, with no more sound than the air. A quiet jolt of electricity pops through me like a cold shock. I don't move. It's shaped like a person, sort of, only thicker, bigger. It might be a bear wary and swaying side to side, snuffing the air and watching me. I hold my knees and work my eyes harder. The dawn comes on windless and slow. Only the music of the spring spilling through the pool and my own cluttered breathing reaches my ears. I slow my breath down, to quiet it so I could hear better. I want a way to turn down the creek like turning down the car radio trying to find an unfamiliar address from half remembered directions. I don't know how long I stay like this, crouched and trying to listen more closely so I could see better and really know what's there.

I know we form perceptions of the world in our minds based upon sensory data. But there is more to it than that. Expectations weave into the framework onto which our perceptions are lashed, fitted and hung. Any gaps are filled in according to what should be there, what we expect to see there. We guess.

I think the whole deal works like a big connect the dot puzzle. Our sense organs provide the dots and our expectations provide the numbers which tell us how the dots are connected so we may see a picture. Our mind fills in all the rest of the details, the color and depth and texture too. Some of these come from our senses, but most of it really comes from our expectations. There aren't so many dots coming in after all so we rely on our patterns, our expectations.

Experience shapes our expectations to a large degree, but our dominant culture really determines the boundaries of our expectations. It builds the walls we agree to live inside, or at least near by. It carves the paths for our beliefs to run down. This framework of expectations and all the paths of our beliefs orders for us our experience. Five hundred years ago people reported angels flying across the night sky. These days, we call them flying saucers. Different explanations from different paradigms but all the while we're still just guessing, still choosing possibilities. Still trying to describe the world and make sense of it.

In the woods that morning, I didn't know what to guess though I tried like hell to come up with something. I already knew it wasn't a person, or any of the other things I knew roamed the woods. Since I'm in the woods, this must be a bear, and if it's a bear by the mushroom, then it is moving back and forth to smell me. In my mind I can almost see a picture of a bear, like in a movie. I can see the shape of the skull, the play of its thick muscles beneath an oily brown coat of fat and fur. I can almost smell its sour enticing musk. But with my eyes, I'm not sure. I crouched by the water, waiting and wondering: If not bear, then what? I tried to acquire more data, or at least to construct a version which the data I already had would satisfy. And all the while I did this, I had the distinct impression of being data fitted into some other being's patternings.

As I watched and the light grew brighter, whatever it was stood even more upright. It too had been crouching, right by the Amanita. I heard a loud snuffling sound, like something with a big runny nose, and then it turned and poured itself straight up the steepest, rockiest part of the head of the draw. It made no sound I could hear, not even after I moved away from the stream toward it, a half dozen brave steps with my canteen held by the straps for a weapon. I heard nothing from up the draw and nothing from on the plateau I knew was above. Behind me past the pool where I drank I heard the snap of a

twig. I spun around, swinging my canteen at three mule deer picking their way toward the watering hole. I could hear just fine, I just couldn't hear what had disappeared up the draw.

I began to wonder if I had really seen anything in the early light. I walked the rest of the way over to where whatever it might have been would have been standing if it really had been standing there. I looked around. The ground was very freshly dug up, a small hole started. So fresh the worms were still visible wiggling their way back into the soft black mud. Where the hole was, the mushroom had been. I could even see the prints the toes of my hiking boots had made a few days earlier when I came up to touch it with my hands. The mushroom was gone, dug up. I looked around for other boot prints but saw none. I sat for a while and watched the deer drink and go away, oblivious to my presence or perhaps careless. The sun came up. I could see the red light of it on the highest tips of the trees along the ridgetop.

I looked again at the dug up earth. The worms were gone and I noticed the outline of track, sort of like a bare footprint, long and wide, a deeper indentation where the ball of the foot would have been, less of a depression where the arch could have been. A few inches in front of the ball trench were five round toe prints, a great big one and four smaller ones. No claw marks in the fresh soft earth. It could have been a bear track, but it was longer and wider. I've never before seen a bear track with a heel print before.

At some point when the data diverges too far from the theory, one must either discard data, or make up a new theory. I am all in favor of new theories. Maybe is one of my favorite words. It could have been a very big bear track, left by a very big and quiet bear, with no claws and deformed feet. This might have been genetic, left over from some ancestors blunder into one of the secret nuclear waste dumps or possible caches of post Armageddon hole cards

stashed in the hills by people I never want to even know about. It could have been a HUGE human track, easily four times the size of my size ten boot print, maybe also mutated by some radioactive exposure. Maybe there was a meteor that fell onto an outfitter camp. No survivors, but they never did find Old Ruben's body... I don't know. I read a lot of science fiction, but I wasn't buying any of those stories.

So what was it? I realize how all this is going to sound, but I can find no way around it. Now I'm no sterno crazed hillbilly muttering furtively into a payphone "No, I ain't a drinkin' man much before five thirty, I know what I seen, dammit", nor am I on the payroll of the National Enquirer, but I think I saw one of the Bigfoots. It's possible, and if I had a more satisfying explanation, I'd take it. Our culture admits at least the myth of Sasquatch to the ranks. Rumors of the elusive Sasquatch dot the pages of legend, folklore and supermarket tabloid rag. Somewhere along the way the possibility of Bigfoot was given stature, no matter how dubious. Bigfoot's existence was something subject to doubt, and most people do just that, and doubt it hard. But the what matters here is that this has become one of the many choices in our world: a choice to either believe or disbelieve in the mythical Sasquatch, and not a choice I had ever seriously made.

I know how this sounds. I've joked around about wanting to go find the Bigfoots and converse with them and maybe live with them and get a ride in one of their flying saucers to the secret island where Elvis lives with Jimmy Hoffa and Marilyn Monroe, but I don't think I had ever seriously considered believing in them. What's more important here is I hadn't actively disbelieved however. I never had to make the choice, never consciously had to decide on a version of the world. Now circumstances demanded I sort them out and make a stand.

I was feeling very sleepy. I filled my canteen and picked my way up the trail and up the stairs to the tower. I used some of the fresh cold water to make a strong pot of coffee and sat drinking it out on the catwalk, swinging my legs over the edge and squinting my into the eastern sun. It was still low and looking me almost straight across into the eyes. I began to wonder about what I had gone through. Now, had I succeeded in munching a taste of the Amanita Muscaria, I would have an easy out: The bigfoot was nothing more than a hallucination, a product of my science fiction fueled imagination and magic mushroom addled senses. However, given the lucid sobriety of my days, my choices were not so simple. Maybe I had come all the way unhinged, driven mad by my stark solitude and now fluttering wildly in my whimsy. I didn't like that idea much. Maybe I slipped into some fugue state like a seizure or flashback and came out of it with some false images burned into my RAM chips.

Maybe I was dreaming, and still dreaming now. Maybe I fell back asleep all warm in my sleeping bag and that really I just now snapped out of it and remembered it all while making coffee. Maybe the dream was so vivid and clear I remember everything as if I had really experienced it. But if this is the case, then what constitutes a real experience? What is reality? How is it formed? What are the rules? I have memories of being there, but that's my subjective bias. I have no objective external point of reference. There was no one with me to ask "Did you see that damn thing too?" No one to even ask "Say, did I really go for a walk this morning, leave the tower before dawn or something?" If I started doubt my own ability to decide between real and imaginary for myself where would it lead me? No where good. Besides, I had the mud drying on my boots and the still spring-cold water left in my canteen, colder than the water left in the jug overnight. I know I went to the spring. I know something happened.

Either I saw Bigfoot, who dug up the hallucinogenic mushroom deliberately, like a pig after a truffle and made off with it, or there is an enormous mutant bear out there who ate the magic mushroom and was either on the brink of it's own extinction or lurking about and a tripping its ursine brains out.

Neither thought brought me any particular comfort. I desperately reconsidered the version of a wacky old bear with a taste for trips frolicking like Yogi and Boo Boo in search of psychedelic picnic baskets. But this cartoonish version of experience doesn't fit with what I felt at the time. Just between you and me, I saw a Sasquatch, and this Bigfoot ate my mushroom. This is why I come to the look out year after year: to see what I can see, and how I can see. Up here my view is better, I see things otherwise invisible. the curve of the earth, the lure of the horizons, fires and the sudden violence of storms. I see the days flow past in one fluid arc, the rise and fall of tides of light. I feel the world tip and turn on its way through the stars. I am immersed, plugged in; everything touches me in waves and unsettling ripples. On lookout I see what I believe possible and how I can know my world. I choose to believe I saw Bigfoot, just as I choose to believe in the ancient Picts, space travel, sub atomic particles and my place in the middle of the universe. I am willing to believe in things beyond my knowledge in order to expand the world of my knowing. I look all around, inside and out, beyond the walls and comfortable paths. I make my way as I go. I watch my back. I do no deliberate evil. I make mistakes. I hope for the best.

Maybe this is enough for now. There's more weather coming on, I smell it in the wind. I sit on the catwalk and watch the whole day go. I watch the light ebb from the sky and all the stars mystery shine. I am hoping still for a clear view inside the horizons of myself, trying to conjure a glint of light or passion to seize and follow like a polestar through this sea of days which rise

and fall and will not wait for me. I know the world is wide and round and spinning through space. I know anything will happen, all around me.

i'd better stop now
to look at these flowers
(lupines, i think, strewn thick)
because, later,
on the way up,
they might be shadowed, hidden in the hurry.
i saw a woman once
working in a store. She had these deep
mystic blue eyes,
and they smiled at me when she looked up.
For once i was actually going to say something
anything, really. i don't remember now
what it was else i had to do, where
i was hurrying late to,
only that her eyes hung in my mind,
rising like a late moon from autumn mists.
When i went back,
the woman at the register said
"Oh, she gone home at eight."
and then the world turned.
And all the pieces moved.

i'm not late now
so i'd better look now.
Stopping in the wind, transfixed
by the wordless psychadaelia,
whirling indigo blues
swirling in the wish of a warm summer wind,
billowing
from afar, and breaking,
soft waves over my island;
fading and fading.

Collusion

Frog was crouched in the snow by the Subaru, wearing an honest-to-god coonskin cap and cradling a rifle. I'd just stepped out onto the porch to clear my head and piss. Our toilet hadn't worked right in over a week. We'd been using the one at the I.G.A. for more serious matters. Mostly I just needed to get some air and clear my head. I was looking around, stretching and reaching up through the clear, icy air, trying to touch the morning sun hanging low over what was left of the garage roof when I saw him spying over the bumper. I really didn't want to think too much about it at first, didn't want to think about it at all. I had other things on my mind just then. After a minute though I turned halfway to watch him a little more closely. Usually we gave each other quite a bit of room. The house was small and we each liked our privacy. We both had our problems, intrigues and triumphs, though not many of those. The house was cheap anyway. Frog, my roommate seemed to be stalking something, laying in ambush. All right, I thought, this is a little strange, but no real cause for alarm. I'd seen him with weapons before, lots of times, all different kinds. He hunts, I think, but I really hadn't known him all that long. It wasn't a very big rifle.

After a second or two I started walking toward him. The Hard crunch of snow beneath my floppy boots alerted him. He watched me out of the corner of his flat grey eyes with out turning his head. I was getting cold wearing just a pair of shorts and the greasy old sorrels I'd found in the basement. I didn't really want to get involved in whatever was going on. Frog had brought some serious shit down on himself a time or two, and my luck wasn't running all that hot lately.

Then again, cold or not I wasn't really in too big a hurry to get back inside. Leann, in my bed, half awake and waiting for me was one of those other things on my mind. Her and what ever the hell it was we had left to talk about.

Thinking about something else, I called out "Hey, Daniel Boone! What are you doing?" I waved my hands in front of me, hoping to catch his eye.

"Shush!" he hissed. He turned both his eyes square on me and stared hard. His eyes empty and serious, reflecting no light. The rest of his face, grizzled with blonde and grey beard stubble and windburn, creased in on itself and made him look much older than he was. Usually he looked either hung over or goofy, sort of clown like with his wide nose, broken so often it was beaten almost flat. It was hard to take him seriously, ever, but just then he looked like he meant it. What ever 'it' was.

"It would be best if you went inside," he said at last, quietly. He looked away and waved his elbow at me three or four times before peeking around the back of the Subaru again. That's when our neighbors' door popped open. Their springless screen door slammed back into the white clapboard siding, shattering a string of skinny icicles clinging in front of their gas meter. She was wearing her pink terry cloth bathrobe and the heavy oiled workboots with no laces. I knew the thick robe well. And the boots. Cindy was leading their dog out by its collar to the post where they kept it chained. It was a mean goddamned dog, ugly as a pig's ass and always barking. Constantly. It got loose once, last August, and chased Frog into the dying apple tree beside our garage. It kept him treed and cursing for about twenty minutes before it climbed half way up after him and tore a chunk out of his ass. Its barking grew more frenzied and rabid whenever it saw Frog. Nothing could stop it from straining at chain and going wild with froth and noise to get at Frog, not even when her husband beat it with his fists. The dog didn't just hate Frog. Two days after it

treed him, it bit my arm. I was standing right by our mailbox. I never even saw it coming. One second I'm pulling out a stack of bills and coupons, the next minute I'm digging my thumb into it's eye trying to get it to let go of my other arm. For once it wasn't barking. It wasn't even growling. Cindy heard me screaming and came out with a jack handle. After the dog was back on the chain she led me into the house for some rum and bandaids. We never got to the bandaids back then and still hadn't.

She saw me standing on the porch in the sun and waved. Frog hissed while she hooked the dog's heavy leather collar to the chain. Her robe fell part way open, giving me a quick shot of her small breast hanging and silhouetted in the soft folds of terry cloth and low winter light. She caught my eye, staring back as hard as I knew I was looking at her. Smiling, she pulled her robe closed slowly, one hand disappearing inside and lingering for a long second. She wet her lips and winked, her tongue pushing out between her thin lips.

"Hey kid," she said. She always called me kid, even though we were almost the same age. It was one of the things I liked less about her. "Why don't you come over, in a lil' bit." She stage whispered this last and pointed her chin toward the loaded logging truck parked in front of their house and mostly blocking our driveway. I glanced down quick at Frog and then back up at her. It was a good thing Frog didn't look like he was in any hurry to go any where soon.

"Come over for some coffee," she said. "Or something. Looks like another one of those lazy days, you know?" She knew I did. She laughed, reaching up then far behind her head and pouring slowly over. Her hands touched the ground behind her feet and she wheeled into a pair of shaky back walkovers, revealing a fast glimpse of a long white thigh and some darker intrigue in-between. I couldn't help but smile, wondering if Frog was getting any

of this. She was a champion once, of sorts. High school baton twirling queen or something. There was a plaque and framed newspaper photo in the hall by their bedroom. I'd never bothered to look too close. She grinned at me. She was still almost beautiful. To be fair, she was beautiful, except I was working hard on trying not to think of her that way anymore.

Their door banged open again, slamming back into the side of the house with a crack like a starter's pistol in the quiet chill air. Her husband, Nick. Frog flinched, his face pointing skyward now, his hands tightening on the stock of his gun. She spun around to face the thick limbed lumbering of the man, her husband. I glanced down at Frog again, leaning back against the wheel well, eyes closed, moving his lips as if in silent prayer. He held his rifle close to his chest. He tipped his face my way, eyes still closed, touching his finger to his lips, motioning me to silence. I wanted to go in the house but something kept me watching like bad daytime t.v. The cold made my ribs ache. I touched the still faintly fading bruise over the right side ones. It was still in the rough shape of a heavy boot heel. A logging boot. Nick's logging boot to be exact. I was still glad the son of a bitch hadn't been wearing his caulks. I wondered if maybe Frog had nailed her too, only he wasn't going to wait to get his ass beat.

"What the fuck you looking at?" Nick spit across the driveway, folding his wife in his thick arms and herding her close to his heavy, flannel-wrapped belly. Suddenly I was very glad Frog was down there with the rifle, coonskin cap and all. She lifted her face to his, rising up on her toes. She turned her husband, the big man, slowly around and around, like a slow dance, kissing him and waving at me. Her face peered around his shoulder, and she winked, turning away while his hands framed her behind, pulling the pink terry cloth tight over the curves there. His wide face was pressed hard in the soft of her neck. Frog was running his tongue over his lips and flexing the fingers on his trigger hand

slowly. Out then in to touch the crescent trigger. Things were getting out of control again.

Letting her go, he spun on his heels and scooped up a handful of frozen rocks from the driveway. He threw them at me, or in my direction. Most of them rattled against the side of our house near my head. I waved, holding my other hand casually in front of my balls.

"You stay the fuck away from her, asshole" he growled, jabbing the air between us with a hard stubby finger.

Not quite two weeks ago he'd come home a little early from work and found me still sitting at his dining room table, drinking a big glass of his dark rum on ice. I remember thinking that if things had been different, it might have been the two of us sitting there, drinking and passing an afternoon over the scuffed and water ringed wooden table. It just happened that Cindy, his wife, walked into the room just about the same time, not even wearing the pink robe she'd left the room in. He jumped to a few conclusions, and I can't say he was wrong. Being unemployed in the winter left me with entirely too much time on my hands. We might've been friends, him and me, or if not friends then at least gotten along. Maybe had some fun if things had been different. I remember almost smiling up at him from the chair, thinking how nice it would have been to pour him a drink of his own liquor and listen to him tell the jokes and stories he'd heard from the sawyers. I remember raising my arms to cover my head in slow motion. His lips pulled back in a grin or snarl, and I swear he had a mouthful of jagged, pointed teeth. Fangs like an animal. He was smiling when his fists broke through my hands. We could've been friends. I came to in the snow bank by my back door, with a mouthful of warm rusty blood, and a headache that started in my knees. I wish I'd remembered more, I just wish I had some of the details.

Nick stared at me across the driveway daring me. Then at her, shaking his head from side to side slowly and violently like he was tearing meat with his jaws. Frog was sliding his hand up and down along the top of his rifle in slow sexual strokes. I almost laughed. Here we all were. He turned to look back at her. Cindy smiled and pouted out her lower lip, blowing him a soft kiss. Something inside of his face fell. His fire faded a little, his jaws went slack, just for a second. Things twisted all around like small animals wrestling inside a bag of coarse skin. His eyes flickered my way, fast, then back to her. She still had her lips pushed forward. He made a half stumbling step, reaching toward her, like he couldn't make up his mind. I saw his jaw clench tight, even from across the way. I could almost hear the tendons crackling. The air was that clear.

"Try not to look so easy to fuck," he said to her between tight teeth, his jaw sharp and shaking. He spun away, not even glancing at me. I heard her laugh a quick snort of air through her nose and I could picture her rolling her eyes at me, but I didn't look. The hard snow popped under his heavy heels churning down the driveway to his rig. He swung into the cab and fired up the diesel, blowing twin pillars of loud blue smoke straight from behind the cab. The whole world thrummed with the heavy idling rhythm of it. The glass rattled in the windows behind me. He gunned it hard, grinding it into slow gears and moving away, the trailer stacked chock full of shifting muddy logs. The thick chains clanked around the tires, relentless on the snowpacked road. I watched it disappear around the corner of their house, feeling the ground tremble and subside until it was gone. The air was mysteriously sweet with the taste of fumes.

"Gimme a minute, yeah?" Her voice was thick and shaking. She was standing half way up the porch steps, working hard to smile and push her lips

out at me now. Her head was tilted to the side, one hand slowly rubbing the front of her throat. I shrugged, shivering, and watched her bounce up the last few steps and disappear into the house. I knew better. I should leave this one alone, but women make me crazy.

As soon as she left, their dog started barking. Frog came to life, rolling onto his belly. Peering from under the back bumper of the Subaru, he sighted along the barrel of his rifle. I really didn't want to be seeing this. I had enough to worry about already. But something was perversely compelling. I had to see it happen. Frog's body, half in shadow, was almost still. I watched him swell up with air and hold, his head tipping slightly to the left. The tail of his cap lay straight down his neck and shoulder. The dog barked and barked, the regular echo of it bouncing off the houses, the trees and frozen branches, lifting up to the startling clear blue of the sky. I imagined a huge bird arcing in fluid slow motion, wheeling overhead wings straight and looking down at all the matchbox yards, the thin trails of wood smoke pouring out of mostly sleeping homes.

I almost missed the first shot, the capgun pop of it rolling back off the far fence to my ears a distinct instant before the dog's startled yelp and hop, favoring one leg. One of the front one's, the left one, dangled at a sickening angle from about mid-leg. I was surprised at how quiet the small rifle was, no louder than a hand clap really. I heard Frog work the bolt, heard the ringing arc and hiss of the brass cartridge hitting the snow and melting in. His coonskin cap bobbed up and down once, deliberately, then he leaned over his rifle again, and drew a breath. I did too, holding my breath while he took aim. I could taste it, taste the chewy bluesweet of diesel and thin stale wood smoke mingling with the faintest hints of the fourth of July. It was an instant of power. We were locked together with our breathing. The dog was panting furiously, scared. It was

outside, and we were in. I was silent. This time I saw the brief muzzle flash, even from behind, saw the dog drop suddenly on its face as its other front leg gave way. I saw its mouth moving, but everything was silent, slow and almost pure, washed clean by the morning sun. Like a slow machine contracting, I felt my breath give way, felt Frog working the smooth metal of the bolt. The cartridge hung in the air, suspend, gathering all light into the golden instant of apogee. By now the dog had managed to work its way to the end of its chain, as far away from Frog as it could get. But not far enough. I didn't want to be seeing this.

And then its one good leg was frantically pawing at the snow. It was trying to right itself, trying to escape, to run away. That's when it all went back to sound again for me: The dopplering yelps and hoarse, staccato barks draining and burbling from the animal like the last thick wine from a spilled bottle. The rasp and click and hiss and clack precision of Frog moving the bolt on his rifle. The quick sizzle of the spent brass cylinder joining the other two in the crushed snow. His soft chuckling came to me like a friendly hand on the shoulder and I couldn't be sure I wasn't laughing too.

Faintly, through the thin walls of her house, the same thin walls I'd first heard their screaming midnight battles through, came the dull pulsing of reggae beats cranked as loud as their stereo would go. I could almost picture her, Cindy moving slow and hard from the hips, swaying limber backed side to side, her eyes closed. Drinking rum and lost in the music she waited for me. If I went she would cry a little like always and show me a bruise or tell me a story. We would make love in their sour unmade bed. I would hold her and kiss her tears until they stooped. I would pretend I could still save her. Instead I watched while Frog shot the last leg out from under the crying and savaged dog.

For some reason the retort of the rifle dissolved into the morning air. It just went away. It was a quiet thing, almost pretend like a game. The dog still

struggled to get away, scrabbling pitifully on its stomach with its twisted and bloody legs splayed out at random around it. I felt a little sick. Frog laughed out loud, cursing to himself in rhythms like incantations, weaving spells and working the bolt again. I went in the house, pulling the air of the closing door tight around me.

Inside, it's warm. I don't believe any of this has happened. I try real hard and almost make it stick. Shucking my boots, I make my feet slap against the cold linoleum, drumming uneven rhythms of my own all the way back to bed.

She's waiting there, this other one, the real story. This is the one I have to lie to again and again. By now she expects it. We don't know any other way. I hover over her, watching her face as she sleeps naked and burrowed deep in my soft sheets. I lean to kiss her, feeling the heat of her full lips warm inside my own. She hums from the back of her throat. My heart skips, stumbles and it's hard to breathe. Her voice is thick and sweet like dark honey. I don't understand how these things work for me. The ones I could care less about, the ones impossible or damaging, I cling too with obsessive abandon. And the others, those rare and precious few who offer glimpses of salvation I torture and twist and abandon by making them hate me or worse yet, by letting them pity me.

Leann makes me crazy. We met two months ago at the bank where she works. I walked in to cash my unemployment check and the next thing I knew I was asking her out for a drink. "No drink," She'd said "But I'll buy you a latte." What the hell? And on we went from there. she's got a job and big plans, something about a greenhouse. We talk about it now and then. We talk about me getting a job too, and about us getting a house. So far nothing we have talked about has happened. I have a feeling it's all my fault. About a week ago

I figured I'd just break it off all together but something held me back. I don't know what. Last night she tells me "We can't go on like this," and goes to sleep. hovering over her in the morning light I know that hers will be the name that comes first from my throat when I wake from my tangled dreams in the arms of all the other lovers I will ever have.

"Leann," I say, barely breathing and brushing the auburn curve of hair from the round heat of her cheek. I touch where her eyes crinkle when she smiles. They flutter open like butterfly wings and she does smile. I trace my fingertips around her eyes, still fuzzy and blurry. They're sparkling and full of wet light, watching me from the barest threshold of her gentle dreams. It's all too soft, too good. This is the place I never want to leave. She shifts her head on the pillow, the hair rubbing on worn flannel almost too quiet to hear over the indifferent metronome of my grandfather's wind up alarm clock. I don't think I'm even breathing anymore.

Somewhere I hear, or maybe it's barely feel, air tremble, a frantic, hoarse yelping torn from deep inside something. Tasting the faint blue smoke in the back of my throat, I can see in my mind the slow machine of it all, clear in the cold air. Breathing, contracting, closing in. One more sharp, faint pulse like a heart beat. It's quiet, suddenly quieter than I can ever remember it being. The clock keeps beat, time is moving. I know what's out there, I can't even pretend not to hear it any more. But it's so quiet.

"What's wrong?" Leann says, slow and thick with safe sleep. I turn and look back at her. Her hands move under the blankets. I watch the ripples spreading toward me, waves opening up, taking me in.

"Nothing, I guess," I say, shrugging, looking at the plant dangling in the window, barred in sunlight scattered by dusty blinds. It looks half dead. I can't

remember watering it. I'm not sure I care. I pick up the clock and start winding it, careful not to go too tight.

She pulls the sheets part way back. The warm sweet smell of her, of both of us, rolls over me like wind from somewhere I never seem to go, only dream about. Under the blankets, she folds around me, twining her body in mine, weaving us together with the magic threads of her flesh. There is more to it than this, I'm almost sure, but it doesn't matter.

"You never talk to me," she says. She's right, but I say it anyway.

"I do," I say my voice breaking up. I know this is a serious moment and that I should try harder, but all I can think of is Frog and the rifle. The gunshots and bloody scattered dog and the pink robed woman dancing next door, all of it waiting for me outside my bedroom door. "I'm talking to you right now." I say.

"But you're not here," she says. I can feel her shaking her head against my back. I keep my eyes closed.

"I'm here," I say. "Where the hell else am I?"

"Yeah, but not *here* here," she says squeezing me. She's got this way of twisting me up with her words. "And I need you *here* here with me, all the time. Right?"

I can't answer her. I am not even sure what the hell she is talking about.

"But you're not," she says. "And you won't be. Ever." A week ago this is exactly what I wanted her to be saying. I wanted it to go like this, fade away so easy. But all of a sudden I want it different. I want to answer her, but for once I can't lie to her. Not now, not even when it would save me. Not even when I might really mean it if I said I would change, that I knew what I wanted. I can't say anything.

Her fingers and hands turn me toward her and I bury my face into the curve of her neck, breathing the spice of her, holding on tight. Too tight I know.

She rocks, shaking me slowly into a warm drowse. It's curious, this rocking. I can never figure out where in her body it starts. She doesn't even realize she does it most of the time. She's no help. But still, I'm curious. There is no future in it, that's what I'm trying to believe lately. It's a theory. There is no future in any of this, only momentum, only the tide.

"I have to go" she says in a whisper, her voice quiet music. And then "Don't," and I know tears are spilling from my eyes. They're running down her neck, on my nose, and she holds me tighter, just a little. "Don't, " she says, rocking slowly.

I fill my arms with her, fill my mouth, my lungs, my heart, trying to touch as much of her as I can, while I can. This is what I want to be true, what I want to believe. I wish we'd make love, lose everything into the rhythm, blind with heat, and sweat streaming and fresh like furious rain.

I can't start these things, I know what comes after. She has other plans. She is already lost to me and my heart skips. I know what happens. I know what it means.

"I want to tell you something," I say.

But Frog will come in the house soon, pounding on my door, his whispering tinged with the maniac. "Steve. Steve, man, I need you. I need you." Leann will ask what it is, but I can't tell her. I can't stop any of this. I've seen him this way before. He will need me, will beg me out of here, out of the bed, out of this lover's arms and out into the cold of the kitchen and the world. It will all be over before I know it, all of this. He will explain everything, tell me all of what happened as if I had not seen it myself, with my own eyes. I will pretend I didn't know. He will be almost in tears one minute, slumping against the white door of the refrigerator and rolling his head back and forth over the magnets, the

tail of the coonskin knocking loose a brief flurry of scraps of paper and small plastic letters. I will need to feel sorry for him while things rustle and rattle to the floor and I bend to scoop them up, gathering them close to my chest. And then he will be laughing like a child, dancing around on the linoleum, his boots thundering in waltz time and his rifle, reeking of oil and cordite rattling against the chipped enamel of the oven where he will lean it when I fumble out, wiping my eyes and buttoning a thick shirt over the sweat drying on my chest. My heart will be hammering, hard and nervous. I know what will be coming. Calming down, he will hand me a cup of coffee, still warm. It will be his cup, his coffee, the same cup he will have held staring out the window early when the night was closer, before some of this happens. I will drink from it, shaking, and he will ask me for help. I see this again and again in my mind, trying to find a way out, but there is none. It goes on.

"We need to hide the dog, " he says. "You have to help me. You know. You watched." His sharp eyes will tear into me, the hard flinty grey piercing me, accusing me. He needs me, he wants me to do this. His eyes tell me we aren't playing games now. I will always remember that he shot the legs off a dog before killing it, that his guns fill this house. I will know that his will, like his scarred hands, is hard, callused from use and thick with folded skin and steel shaped by years of work with machines and blood. He is a hunter and I remember that he laughs while the animal dies.

"OK," I say, shaking my head "OK," but it does not matter. It will not be OK. I can't change any of this. Never.

Later we will walk back from the woods by the river, silent, stony. I won't think about it. I see myself trying to rub dried blood off my hands. It is sticky and smells like sweet rust, like corroded wires, and it rolls off my hands in thin cylinders which I drop to the snow like crumbs, leaving a trail, not to find my way

home but so I know to never go this way again. When we come out of the trees Frog walks to his Subaru without looking at me. He bends to pick the cartridge casing out of the snow by the bumper. Standing up he nods to himself and I can hear the almost musical rattling of brass shaking in his loose fist. Nodding once more, he turns and I see him smile before he gets in his car. From the edge of the trees I can see their porch. I can see the blood staining the packed snow by their sidewalk, it's pink, almost like a frothy snow cone, dotted with faded yellow dog-piss stains and the small hard brown remains of everything it had eaten. All that's left, blood, shit and piss, is melting into the snow with our footprints as the sun works on the day.

For just an instant the colors all fade away, everything blurs into a stark afterimage, everything gone to dark bones and black shadows. Frog starts his car, the small engine coughs and then whines as he winds it up hard. He waves and pulls out of the drive way into the street and is gone. From the trees, I watch her. She is sitting on their porch, wearing hard red lipstick, her hair shining and brushed back from her face. Her pink robe is drawn tight to her neck, and under the bite of her fresh cigarette will linger the flowers of the perfume I liked on her. She is smoking and crying and I have drying blood on my shirt, on my pants, peeling off my hands. This is what's left. I have nothing to say. I can't look at her and walk away. I won't look.

And inside, it is all over. The bed is made, smooth and cold, and the plants are dripping water. This is no surprise. There is no note. There are no more chances, no more words.

And later, when her husband comes home, they love and drink and fight. She chases him around the yards after dark with his small pistol, both of them naked and screaming mad again. She fires all the bullets into the windshield of

his truck while he wrestles with the starter. Standing alone in my window, I watch the muzzle flashes ripping into the night. I hear the hollow drums again and feel my heart skip.

And while they embrace, the pistol still hanging in her soft hands, I remember everything. The sharp bite of their dog's teeth in my arm, the taste of dark rum and furtive love, The crisp morning air, the rifle shots and the drumming of my own sluggish blood. And before I go to sleep I will remember to forget the other one, remember to forget her and think no more of her. I will not dream. I will just run, run hard and fast and far away, but even I know there is no where left to go.

Rollercoasters

Killing time in the airport bar, we sat in the smoke, drinking beers I paid for, and he's telling me his story. He'd worked at a carnival, and had a gold tooth. Somebody's husband's brother nailed him with a tire iron. Said he found the other pieces, on his knees in the dust and blood, but not that one. "Bastard's brother took it, for spite." He leans close to say this, rotten with piss and yellow teeth.

"I run a rollercoaster," he gurgles, shaking his small head, "its a real ride, not like the candy ass parks." He should know. He'd put it up, took it down, loaded and drove the truck. They'd fire him every so often. He drinks. "On the job, off the job, as the job." Snorting, he told me it put the edge on, "for people in line too, me hanging on the lever, pulling on the bottle."

"Bein' fired ain't bad," he chuckles. "Go to a motel, late. Tell 'em you work for some big hauling outfit; rig's broke down, you need a room while they wire cash to fix it." He'd stay a while, eating room service. Drink in the bar 'til they kick him out, in the room 'til they cut him off. One afternoon, he just skips out. They'll hire him again by then. No one else can ever get it together.

"Helps to hold a few pieces back," he grins, reaching in his coveralls, spilling bolts and metal pieces over the bar.

Touchtone Paradise Blues

Your friends begin to worry about you. They start having conversations about you when you are not there:

"There he go, Ricco" one says, call him Duane. Duane picks his teeth with a yellow and gray matchbook, "Dean's trippin'." The overhead lights blur off his smeared glasses.

Another, Ricco, agrees, one hand in the pocket of his stained coveralls: "Yeah, I hear you. I walk in to see if he done the floors yet. There he was, bent over the desk, staring at the walls. He gon' get his sorry ass fired this time." Ricco shakes his wide brown head and slaps the desk by your elbow with his free hand. "A zombie. It's fucked up, man, like voodoo," he says, snapping his thick, dry fingers twice in front of your face.

"Shit, " says Duane, shaking his head too, then pushing his glasses back up his nose with a stubby finger. "Hey Dean," he says, leaning close to whisper loud, clowning, waving his fingers in front of your eyes, "You smoking rock?" They laugh too hard and fast, the flat barking echoes spinning around the room and falling away. A muted bell echoes from down the tiled hall followed by the faint creaking of an elevator door chugging slowly open. Both men shift their feet and slide their hands deep into their coverall pockets. The lights drone overhead.

"Fuck Dean," Ricco says, wrinkling his wide forehead and breaking the spell, "I'm getting me some chicken." So the conversation turns as they walk out the door. They are your friends, of course, but soon find something else to talk about besides your disintegration. These conversations are no concern of yours, unless they happen in front of you as if you were not there. Besides, it's lunchtime.

And no matter how early you get up, you always manage to fumble out the door five minutes after you were supposed to be somewhere. This is how it works. You're always late, you never get anything done. You've stopped caring. You have started to believe there's a certain plane of thinking and doing that is possible only when one is supposed to be thinking and doing something else. Great thoughts come only unbidden. You believe this. You want great thoughts.

"You are damn lazy, Dean," your mother used to say, but you insisted it was the corridor down which true genius must stroll. Your wife, former wife that is, had her own theory:

"You're a fucking catatonic, Dean, that's your problem. Are you listening to me, Dean? Dean? Goddamnit to shit Dean..." You can still hear her voice, see her spinning on the heels of her wool socks and sliding back into the kitchen. You think she had buckets full of theories in those last few days. Buckets full, stacked behind the closet door, under the bed, waiting on the shelf in the mildewed utility room with the cracked flower pot, right next to the rat poison and pesticides. Good riddance to her, the bitch.

One night you sit by the phone after hanging up halfway through dialing. What are you afraid of? An old girlfriend? So what if she called you a louse, so

what if she said she never wanted to talk to you again, so what if this was three years ago, before you were even married the first time? You sit back and wait for the other side of the album to start, laughing about all the friends that would know how you felt just from the title. You try writing them both a letter, but putter away the intensity digging through the drawer for a new typewriter ribbon. The smooth curved wood of the chair is cool against your bare back. The album side starts again. The blue slumped shadow on the wall pours another few fingers of scotch. You listen to yourself argue that while yes, drinking alone might be a warning sign, it still tastes good, or at least feels good. Or the idea of it tastes good or feels good. At least you want it to, so why worry?

"Why don't you talk to me any more, Dean?" Voices in the air, her voice, all of theirs, all the same. "Don't you love me? Dean? Dean? Dean, are you drunk? Are you!"

You look at the shadow. Its just your shadow but you can't seem to get a quiet minute of peace, not even now. It might've been nice to talk to her once more, just to tell her to shut up. What might you really have said if you'd let the phone ring? If she'd been home. If she'd answered. If she'd been alone. If she'd even remembered you. None of the other's could, not ever again. All this iffing only leads you down the road to ruin. Take another smoky pull of warm scotch from your coffee cup. You light a candle and look for something to read, find nothing but books, and reach for the guitar. After tuning, the cup is empty. Maybe this is the evening that really begins your serious career as a songwriter. You see yourself years later giving an interview, shaking your head and laughing sadly about the old days. Your band The Road To Ruin came out of nowhere, shot to the top. You imagine the interviewer asks about the drinking problem. Laughing casually, (you are always laughing in the world you see for yourself but can't remember the last time you laughed for real with someone

else. You are feeling the whiskey's embrace and drift into the chords you can play without thinking. The interviewer is still waiting: you didn't answer her last question.) you tell her " After a while I just got bored with it and put it down," knowing then, even in your fantasy world, that you are lying. Soon your eyelids grow thin and sticky, but you are afraid to sleep. The phone melts and swims into a gray watery blur. You reach for it like a drowning man. What does surrender to the undertow mean? You have to hold your breath, biting your lips to keep the laughter back. This kind won't stop. You know better by now. The dial tone quits in your hand. It is ringing. Maybe the phone knows what you want, who you need. Listen close, keeping your breathe a slow and quiet rasping in your own ear. Another ring, and someone answers. A voice. A woman's voice, telling you, to please hang up the phone and try your number again. She says "If you need help, hang up the phone..." Hang up. Dial all the right numbers in the right order, but the phone is still on the hook. You're safe. Old girlfriends in reach, ex wives forever gone, you're safe. Pick up the phone, dial numbers at random and listen to people as they answer after two rings, five rings, three rings, one. Some of them are people you see on the streets. Listen to them.

Maybe tomorrow, standing in line somewhere, the person in front of you might be telling her friend about the terrible night she had. "It was awful, June, the phone kept ringing, and there was never any one there, just silence. No, no heavy breathing, nothing like that. Just, like someone waiting. It was creepy, you know?" Enter the conversation then. Say the same thing happened to you, that it was weird, "The damndest thing." You'll laugh a little about how the world tosses people together at the oddest of times, in the strangest of ways. "Fate," you'll say and stare hard at her. There will be a fluid radiance in her auburn hair. It floats around her when she moves and smiles. Someone has to say the

right thing, and you'll ask them to join you for lunch. One of them has other plans but of course the one whose phone rang all night says sure, why not? Why the hell not? Walking to the restaurant she says she has never gone out for lunch with someone she met in line at the bank, or maybe supermarket or library or post office. Buying cigarettes. Waiting for an elevator. At the dentist. Try them all out, feel for the perfect fit. Laugh and tell her "I'm the same way. In fact," you'll say, "I've never asked a random stranger out for anything." This is true. You are laughing again in the tomorrow of your mind but in the tonight or early morning of your living now, you are only imagining. You are tired and your cup is empty. Close your eyes hard.

She will still sit across the restaurant table, the light catching her hair in sunbeams. You are mesmerized, her eyes bubble with their own depths of illumination. Her tiny hand is steamy and smooth. Her soft fingers move slowly between yours. By now you are already lost, overwhelmed by the promise of some other near enough to almost touch. The fear is fading. You don't know what this fear is, only that it is icy and follows you even into your dreams. You almost hang up the phone, realizing that somewhere along the way you started hitting redial, hitting at it relentlessly and without hope, the way you reach for your cup when you're deep into the evening. It's ringing. Hold it close to your ear, rolling your empty cold cup hard back and forth across your forehead and tapping the handle against your temple. It's late. The ringing becomes a light at the end of a dark tunnel, echoing and echoing in your head. You are receding. You are lost in the labyrinth of ringing.

Someone answers.

"What? What do you want?" The voice trembles. Passion? Fear? "Who are you? Tony? Is that you? Quit calling me you sonofabitch. Stop it goddamnit! Stop it, stop it, stop it!" The phone slams down in your ear with an electric slap. It

is a nice voice, even broken on the verge of hysterics. Put the phone down, turn out the light and wrap yourself in the itch of an old blanket. Fate. You have touched someone's world, you have made a difference somewhere. Maybe you will meet her, tomorrow. Maybe you will talk with her. She will smile. You will laugh. Maybe you will go to lunch, maybe dinner, maybe get married. You watch too much television, so maybe you will follow her, for months and months, just watching her, calling her in the midnight. Maybe you will kill her. Maybe she will kill you too. You wonder.

The windshield wipers rise and fall, blearing sleet in ragged arcs across the glass while you slur into the post office parking lot. Even though it's morning, the lot is jammed full but there is a place to slide into just ahead of a violent green pickup truck. The driver glowers with your own bloodshot eyes. He looks worse than you feel. The two of you should go off and have bloody marys. He mouths something through several layers of glass and smog, moving his lips like a bloated and pissed off goldfish. He could be you tomorrow. You throw your head back, laughing, racing the engine and spewing out thick blue smoke. Grinding his beaten truck into gear, he drives away defeated. Maybe he has gone off to stalk you. Who knows? Maybe he tried to call you last night, but the line was busy. Smile at the air outside the heavy glass doors. Inside, the long lines of people are chattering about things that irritate you like the drone of fluorescent lights, like the whirl of insects at night. They cannot imagine your recent triumph on the icy parking lot. Something smells, or maybe it's someone, sour like a beaten wet dog.

"You're an intolerant bastard, Dean, that's your problem."

It's that voice again, your wife's voice inside your head. Anything sets it off. It rises out of the babbling of crowds, out of the whining of insect swarms, out

of car horns and traffic jams, rises like a swarm of flies from a road kill carcass spread on hot asphalt. She had all the answers. It's maddening and no one in line talks to you. They all know each other. They're members of the same Elvis fan club chapter. Imagine them wearing shining gold sequined jackets, swapping black velvet paintings, roadside trinkets, all the while discussing the possibilities of truth behind the latest flurry of sightings near Dowagiac or Elko. Watch the toe of your shoe paw the wet brown floor and catch the corner of a conversation from in front, just above the two pairs of black, tall heeled boots, one with fringe tassles.

"...the weirdest thing, you know? Creepy. I didn't sleep at all. I just couldn't, Celie, I'm a total wreck. I think I should move or something..."

Your stomach fills with shifting sand. You look up. This doesn't happen for real. Her bloodshot eyes are not quite as red as her dark, coppery hair. It's almost crimson in places, where the fluorescent light dances and plays in the water droplets still holding on. So far you have only seen half her face, and she hasn't looked at you, but you want to believe there is something familiar about her. She twitches, her rounded shoulders slumping forward. The air is moist and too hot, but she is shivering. Tired. There is something muted about her, a luster filmed over as if this were just one of the bad days in a life that is usually better. Lean slightly forward and try following the conversation, something about a world full of crazies. This could be the conversation for you.

"I know, but why do they have to pick on me? It's just not fair." The woman who is a wreck is talking to Celie her tall friend, taller than The Wreck anyway.

"What is?" sighs the tall one, fed up with the whole conversation. Distracted, she looks around the room, periscope up. She's scanning for action, for possibilities. Her watery dark eyes flash across yours. Nothing registers, unless boredom counts. She continues her surveillance, nodding occasionally

to something The Wreck says. Her head is too big for her long white neck. When she nods you think of the drinking birds your wife kept balanced on the kitchen windowsill. The sunlight would stream through their bulb bellies, catching the red liquid and scattering the thin pink shimmerings across the tiny scratches on the linoleum. The line has not moved since you walked in. Scuffing road salt and wet sand under the sole of your shoe, you can't remember how long ago that was. Maybe you have fallen into a crack in the sidewalk of time, doomed to a cold rainy morning in the post office waiting and watching while someone's toothless grandmother tapes carefully over every inch of coarse brown twine knotted around an oblong box. You watch patiently, but she runs out of tape, just before she is done and needs to start a new roll. There is only one window open. The balding clerk with cracked horn rimmed glasses smiles at her, refusing to look at the man in a gray suit, holding an envelope and waving a fist full of currency. The bald clerk and Grandma try to start the new roll of tape. No one has fingernails. You'd volunteer yours, only their chewed down to the bleeding quick. You've never understood it, never seen yourself doing it. You tried to tell your wife it was elves, but she would have no part of it. Finally they finish taping her package and begin counting out change for the postage. She is almost done, you can sense it. Things will move again. Turning, she totters away from the counter, clutching her blue handbag and smiling wide and slack-lipped toward the rest of the morning. Her life is over. The man in the suit shoulders forward, waving a one hundred dollar bill. This could be what hell really is. The only thing missing is the red-faced man with the pointy stick. Such thoughts come often and unbidden. They are not Great Thoughts but they make you laugh, the kind that feels like a cough in the back of your throat. It's the kind of laugh you can't stop without crying, without coming totally apart, so don't start. You know better. Don't start, dammit, don't. Bite tongue hard, suck cheeks

into your teeth with your eyes closed. fold your arms over your cheststamp your feet. Fight it, fight it. You feel weak. Maybe it's true, these rumors of your disintegration. You know too much about pop psychology to even consider the notions of your own sanity. What really matters is knowing you can't give in, you can't surrender an inch. Then you're lost sucked under by the tide and broken on the rocks. Someone pokes you in the back. It is time to slide docilely into the next place in line. Move your feet, one then the other. Your shoes are mismatched. The one with orange laces is untied. Shame invades you, but you fight it off. Good, this another small victory. Feeling bold now, show them all you are superior, you are in control Make a cow sound, let them know you know we're all part of the herd. Be a social comentator. But it sounds like you're clearing your throat. Shut up. The Wreck is still talking.

"...just kept ringing and ringing. At first I thought it might be Tony. Just like right after we broke up. He wouldn't leave me alone, but it's been so long. Besides, it would be a long distance call for that cheap bastard."

You could really get serious fast with a woman like this. Things are looking up. Tall And Distracted Celie nods.

"Honey, they're all like that" she says, going back into her nod and scan mode. The Wreck continues:

"Anyway, the phone just keeps ringing, and no one is there. I think, OK, maybe the cordless thingy is on the fritz, but it felt like, oh hell, like someone was listening to me. Was waiting for me to say something. It gave me the creeps, some creepo calling in the middle of the night..."

"Why didn't you just hang up, leave it off the hook, rip the damned thing out of the wall? Jesus," Celie says, flinging her long arms wide. Silence. You are wondering the same thing, tilting closer.

"I'm on call Tuesdays," The Wreck says, gnawing at the end of a stubby blue-painted thumbnail. "I thought it might be the O.R. I don't know?" She shrugs her shoulders, her thumbnail popping off her front teeth. Is this the same kind of curiosity that holds glowing eyed rabbits and cats in your headlights, makes them run out into the road at the last minute? And what makes you gun the motor and gurgles, wild with laughter at the subterranean thump?

The Wreck is still talking. "It's like, these things happen all the time on t.v. and in movies, but when they happen to you, they're not as real. I finally did just leave it off the hook and go to sleep. Only I couldn't sleep."

She laughs, a high pinched nervous sound but with a certain music in it. You could grow to like hearing it echoing and full for years to come. You are ridiculous. You know this but do nothing about it, which makes you laugh out loud a little bit. People turn, staring. It makes them nervous. Maybe that smell is you. Sweat leaks out all over your skin. It is you. You giggle again, but it comes out like a thin high moaning. All you can do is stare at the floor, shrugging. The weight of pairs of eyes drifts off you, two by two by two. The Wreck is staring. Not directly, but in furtive little glances out of the corner of the closest eye. She still has not turned her whole face your way, still has not met your eyes. Her eyes might be green, they might sparkle with laughter on a spring afternoon by the riverside. Her jaw is tight, a little pulse right in the hollow curve of her neck under the white angle of her jaw; she thinks you were laughing at her. That's what everyone else thought, at first, just for half a second, but she seems to be holding onto it, still taking it personally.

Think of the right thing to say. Your chance is fading away. You hate it when this happens. Try to remember what it was you said, before. You remember her, this place and conversation. Her laughter or something is from somewhere. The instant is heavy, thick and shimmering with underwater light.

She moves, breathing in deep and slow, the ripeness of her breasts framed taut between the dark borders of her coat. You want to cup them in your hands, gently, feeling their soft weight. The entire post office falls silent into one of those troughs in the storm sea of crowd noise, as if everyone had chosen that very second to inhale; a thousand awkward pauses all at once. There is only the slow billowing of her chest filling with air. Then the wave breaks and people are back to their rush of sound and chatter. The Wreck looks away. You have made an impression. Fortified, trembling inside, you see yourself leaning closer, close enough to smell the wet wool of her coat and the sweet of flowers that must be her shampoo. Wishing you had brushed your teeth, you hear yourself saying "I know what you mean". You have never done this before.

The Wreck looks at you now, right in the face. There is a startled smile on her lips, which seem full and soft, but are not shiny. Her eyes are, yes, green, the liquid green reflection of new leaves on slow big water. Tall And Distracted gives you the once over: A swift, cold glance from the shoulder like an old gunfighter firing from the hip, more out of reflex than necessity.

"My damned phone rang all night too," you say. "No one there, at least no one talking, no click, no noise..." It's much easier than you dreamed.

"Yeah, that's it, that's it!" she says. You can hear twinges of last night's telephone hysteria accelerating in her voice. Grinning and squinting your eyes a little, you try to seem calm and pleased with yourself.

"This world is crazy sometimes" you say, letting your voice drop and fade into a rough airy whisper, drawing out the last syllable and staring into her eyes.

She nods. You laugh. She smiles.

"Crazy," she says, her eyes locked into yours.

"Fucked up," your mouth and lips say, naughty and slow, and she keeps nodding.

"Really fucked up," she laughs, comfortable with the phrase.

You shrug, telling her that you would've just left the damned thing off the hook, ripped it out of the goddamned wall, but sometimes there are late night calls. "Important ones..." You say, letting it trail off into mystery and implication.

She is visibly impressed. "Of course," nodding, "and besides, you just can't surrender to these people." Something about the way she says 'surrender' gives you ideas. Big ones.

"Certainly not. Oh hell no," you say. "Then the crazies win." You marvel at how incredible it is that people's lives are so intertwined, that certain chance meetings seem fated, dealt from the same hand.

"Strange, isn't it?" she says, almost whispering now. Her lips and eyes glisten with fire and intensity. "I mean, the way we both had the same kind of phone calls on the same night, then ending up in the same line at the same post office at the same time and talking... it's just strange." Her voice is breathless, tinged with the wild electricity of a sudden spring storm.

You ready some profound remark about the nature of the universe, the power of random fate, the smallness of the wide world, something like that, while she continues "I guess it's just a small world, or maybe a sign or something. Are you a Taurus?" She says half laughing, rubbing her lips with the back of her hand, nervous.

"Gemini," you say, staring at the soft white curve of her thin neck, watching her throat move in when she swallows. This is inane.

Silence. You imagine asking her out for lunch, or her asking you. Maybe you'd both blurt it out at once "Would you..." and then stand laughing together in the middle of the crowd.

You'd finish asking "...like to go out for lunch, or a cup of coffee or something?" squinting your eyes, cocking your head to the side, calm and in

control. She will agree instantly, while Tall And Distracted snorts like a thoroughbred. The Wreck would catch your eye, rolling hers and shrugging. You would laugh, shuffling forward, mooing, this time loud enough for several people around you to hear. A few chuckles mixed with some answering bleats. Soon the whole crowd would be busy shuffling, making noises like various kinds of driven livestock. You are triumphant.

Maybe she says "My name is Michelle," and you roll the name back and forth in your mouth, feeling for all the edges and music of it with your tongue, tasting its sweetness. For some reason, you can see yourself spending the rest of your days together, going far away from any place with telephones, growing more golden and gray.

One day, you will tell her.

"It was me. I am the one who called that night. I did it. I just started dialing, and somehow I knew I had to keep calling. And then I heard your voice, but didn't know what to say..." you'll blurt out, walking down the beach, watching bubbles foaming on the waves.

She will be surprised, just briefly, then smile, saying "I know. I knew from the first day. Isn't it strange how small the world is? Isn't it wonderful the way things work out?" watching your lips. You'll laugh, gathering each other in deep slow embraces. The tide is rising, sucking cold around your ankles. The sun escapes broken clouds, blossoming at last over the wide sea and skyline. You are washed away in the surreal golden rose hues, sunk now nearly to your knees. She pulls back, kissing lightly your chin. Waves lap your thighs, tingling the hair with cold electricity. You struggle to pull free. Three seagulls arc past, pulsing with molten bronze light. Her hand takes yours, pulls you free of the suck of sand and water, the weight of the undertow. You smile, hold on tighter, and keep walking in the sunset with sand grains coarse between your toes.

"Michelle" you will say out loud, "Michelle" and smile. She will look at you and walk toward the door. Fuck the post office. You will follow, the two of you walking out the door, down the rainy street towards somewhere warm and dry, with steamed windows and air rich with coffee and spice. You'll sit at the small table in back. No one will see. Her hand will be soft and small in yours, both of you nervous, your sweaty palms sliding together. This could be the beginning, it's what you've always seen. Everything. Just this way. The hands pulse, drawing you farther across the table. This makes you smile. You think it's finally going to be all right. This is real now. This time you will not return. You nod at something she says, alive with laughter. You say the right thing.

"Hey," she says, squeezing your arm and shaking you lightly. "Are you OK?" You blink your eyes hard trying to focus in the fluorescent post office light. Her face is close, soft and concerned and you could almost kiss her without having to move. Shivering, you tell her "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired, you know?" She nods, still standing warm and close, her hand on your arm.

"Gemini, huh?" she says, winking and smiling. You laugh a little bit, running your fingers through your damp hair.

"Yeah," you say "That's right." You both are quiet, watching each others eyes. She is still smiling. "You want to go get a cup of coffee or something?" you say, trailing off and looking at the floor, watching her toes. You wait.

"Sure," she says, rocking back on her heels, "Why not?" She is smiling even wider when you look up at her.

The funny thing is, her name really is Michelle. It didn't all go quite the way you'd imagined, but she's here now, smoking cigarettes in the kitchen. As big a loser as you know you are, she must be worse to have been drawn to you.

She is hopeless, really. She takes in strays. Right now she's repotting a dead geranium she seems to think is still alive.

"It just needs a bigger pot," she said "that's all."

"It stinks," you say. "They always stink."

There is no reason for it. These kinds of things happen. She moved in about a month ago, and already it's changed. Things smell funny. It's never quiet enough. She's always talking or laughing about something. It's a pinched nasal laugh, leaking out of her nose. It grinds against your nerves like broken glass in your eye. Most of the time you just block it all out. That's when she gets pissed off. She's pathetic, really. She has to be.

"Who are you calling, Dean? It's late. Dean? Dean? Are you listening to me Dean? I'm talking to you, goddamnit!" she says, her voice breaks. "You never listen, you bastard, you're a zombie, Dean. That's your problem." She turns, her white stocking heels hammering across the linoleum into the kitchen. It won't be long now, oh no, not long at all. She's having lots of theories of her own, it's getting on your nerves.

"Why don't you get another job?" she says over her shoulder, "maybe try not to get fired this time." There's one now, bouncing out of the kitchen like a pingpong ball while her chair slides back. She coughs at the end of that one, lighting another cigarette, mumbling on about something.

"Aren't you going to be late for work?" you ask, smiling. She works nights now.

She sold your guitar last week.

"I'm sick of the same crummy noise." she said. "This way you won't waste so much time, it's for your own good," she said. She even smiled, walking out

the door carrying your guitar by neck. "I'll change, " you said, "I swear." But she'd already pulled the door shut behind her.

She bought you a watch.

She hides the whiskey, she dumps it out.

She brings you the classifieds.

She circles jobs with a red marker.

She says it's for your own good.

She's like the other ones.

She has to go.

She has to go.

Think about this for a minute. The flowerpot is scratching furiously back and forth on the table top, the grit of sand under the orange clay hisses like faint laughter. You can see her, in your mind, her stringy hair hanging lank around her thin face. Her hands flutter around, sifting through dry soil and crumpling dead leaves, casting spidery shadows under the naked forty watt bulb hanging over the table by the utility room door. There is no choice. It makes you shiver. It's all coming now, you can see it. It's building. Bite your tongue, suck your teeth. You've been here before. Your eyes are really open wide. You dial numbers on the phone, pushing the buttons in at random. The touchtone clicks and whispers, telling you secrets, telling you how. You know the way. In the kitchen, water runs into the sink. She is is singing again and your head begins to shake, back and forth until the lips split around your teeth. Something must be done and you have some theories of your own. You know the way. Your head fills with the echoes of ringing, the phone heavy in your hand. She yells from the kitchen, but it sounds so far away, fading. She is almost gone.

"Dean? Who are you calling? It's too late," her voice is flat and fading away. You are underwater. She is walking across the floor, holding the flower pot, coming closer. "It's too late," she says.

"I know," you say, running out of air and reaching for her. "I know."